

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, our podcast invites 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. Today we're speaking with Sarah Aroeste, musician, writer, cultural leader.

"Where are you from?" It's a simple enough question to be considered small talk. "Nice to meet you. Where are you from?" I'm from Massachusetts, but already that, "Where are you from?" question, it's more complicated than it seems on the surface. I was born in Boston. I grew up outside of Boston. This is a very specific term for towns in the vicinity of Boston that you most likely haven't heard of. I lived in Brookline, Massachusetts for two years. Brookline is immediately outside of Boston, but you would not say you were from outside of Boston if you were really from Brookline. You'd be specific. After I finished up rabbinical school in New York, where I lived but was never from, my spouse and I moved to The Berkshires, to Western Mass. I grew up spending every summer in the same area as a camper and then as a staff member at one of the Jewish camps out here. I'm not from The Berkshires originally but between those formative summers and a decade of adult life, we are from here right now, and my kids are from here.

I know our guest today, Sarah Aroeste, from here. We attend the same synagogue. But if you get into more than your current street address or even your current generation, "Where are you from?" takes on many more layers of meaning. That's a big part of my conversation with our guest today. Inspired by her family's Sephardic roots in North Macedonia and Greece, Sarah has spent the last two decades sharing her contemporary vision for Sephardic culture with people around the world. She writes and sings in Ladino, the Judeo-Spanish dialect originated by Spanish Jews after their expulsion from Spain in 1492. Sarah's family story is both about where they left and where they're from.

I just told you my story about being from Massachusetts, but that story started with me, with my generation. I grew up in an Ashkenazi Reform Jewish family. My parents and grandparents are from New York and New Jersey. But going back a few more generations, both sides of my family are from Eastern Europe, most likely an area of land that passed back and forth between Russia and Poland. Every couple of years they moved the border back and forth. That area was known as the Pale of Settlement. We are from a corner of the world that doesn't exactly exist today and that didn't exactly want us there in the first place. And if we really get into where we're from before that, it's a conversation that traces across generations of migration and exile, diaspora and wandering.

Ever since I met Sarah, I have always admired that she leads with her proud cultural identity as a Sephardic Jew, celebrating, teaching and reviving the language of Ladino through music and more. Sarah leads with where she is from. I wanted to understand how Sarah sees her strong ties to music and culture as a vehicle for her leadership, particularly as a woman. I started my conversation with Sarah by asking her to give us some background on Ladino.

Sarah: Ladino is a language. It's also used to describe this larger culture of Sephardic Jews, Jews who can trace their ancestry back to pre-1492 Spain and the greater Iberian Peninsula, including Portugal. But those Jews who lived there prior to 1492, everybody at the time, Jews, Christians, Muslims, were speaking some form of 15th century Castilian Spanish. But after Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand issued the Edict of Expulsion, Jews and other neighbors were expelled if they weren't willing to convert to Catholicism. About a quarter of a million or so Jews decided not to convert and they left, went eastwards towards the Middle East or towards the Ottoman Empire, where we were welcomed by the Sultan. Along the way, they took their Castilian Spanish and picked up linguistic influences of the countries that they passed through or ended up settling in. So Ladino, at its core, is this old, old Spanish, but you'll hear today bits of French, Portuguese, Italian, Greek, Turkish, Hebrew, Arabic and more. It's really this incredible pan-Mediterranean language and it represents this link that a great portion of Jews across the world still retain and it's just a fascinating part of world history.

Rabbi Hirsch: That's amazing. I love hearing the history of the language and also how that integrates with a different part, a different version of Jewish history than we always get exposed to. Have you traced your own family's story and how that connects to the history that you just shared?

Sarah: I have. And in fact, I have Portuguese citizenship because of a movement in Spain and in Portugal to extend citizenship to those people who could trace their ancestry back to the Iberian Peninsula and I was able to do so. In part because my family ended up in a very specific part of the Balkans. At the time, it was called Monastir. That's where my grandfather was born and everyone before him. Today, it's called Bitola and it is located in the borders of North Macedonia. But it's a landlocked area and any Jew who lived in Monastir, the only way they could have gotten there was through the exile from Spain. So the fact that my family is Monastirly indicates that we came from Spain, from that expulsion. In fact, Monastir has the oldest Jewish cemetery in the Balkans. The first gravestone that can be traced is from 1497, so we were there right after the expulsion. So it was pretty easy for me to get the citizenship. But yes, I can trace my family a far number of generations back.

Rabbi Hirsch: That's very cool. And you've traveled to Monastir?

Sarah: Many times, yeah. I go at least once or twice a year. I've worked very, very closely with the community. There are no Jews left in Monastir and only 200 in

Macedonia at all. And they're located in the capital, in Skopje. It's a tragic, tragic story that really relates actually to the Ladino language...When we talk about the Holocaust, most people don't think of Greece or Macedonia. It's not the first country you think of. But in terms of percentage, not in terms of number but percentage wise, they were the hardest hit of any countries during World War II. In Macedonia, where the majority of Jews were in Monastir, my grandfather's hometown, 98% of the Jewish population was exterminated. That's just staggering. You're basically wiping off an entire community off the face of this earth. And so with that, you lose the stories, you lose the recipes, you lose the language, you lose the traditions. And that is very much an influence. Just having that knowledge has influenced a lot of my work.

Music in particular is a really wonderful access point for people who might be unfamiliar because music, in a lot of ways, is just a universal language. You don't need to speak Ladino, you don't need to be Sephardic, but you can appreciate the message of a song. I purposefully work in songs and compose songs that I think have universal messages that anybody can relate to. And I think Sephardic culture can be a bridge for a lot of people who also don't know anything about Judaism. Ladino itself, literally, is a combination of east and west and of Jewish culture, Muslim culture. It has so much Arabic influence. It is a bridge between so many different aspects of contemporary life too. And when people discover Ladino who've never even heard of it, they're just amazed that this language even exists. So the joy in my job, even through the frustration of getting just a foot in the door explaining what it is, but really the joy is helping people discover this hidden treasure trove. It's eye-opening for a lot of people.

Rabbi Hirsch: We live in the same community, same area, our kids are in religious school together. For those who don't know you, I'd love for you just to tell us a little bit about you and your story, how'd you get here, and what brought you into this work and your passion for it.

Sarah: Very specifically, I ended up in The Berkshires because of Tanglewood Music Festival, which is our great music festival here in Lenox. I was actually a young vocal artist in their summer program back when I was a teenager. And I just always, always loved this area for its creativity. It's so filled with artists and musicians and writers and I've just always felt my creative juju here. So as an adult, when my husband and I were thinking of places to live, I just was drawn to coming back to The Berkshires. So that's physically how I ended up here. But my story obviously starts way before then in the work that I'm doing. I grew up as a musician. I always knew that I was going to do something in music but it wasn't until I was probably in college that the Jewish part started to combine with the music. I always thought I was going to be an opera singer. I grew up doing classical music and I was in competitions and I was in summer programs and it took me to Israel.

I was in the Israel Vocal Arts Institute, which is like a summer program of the Tel Aviv Opera. It's like a feeding ground for both Israeli and also international

singers. And I just coincidentally was paired with a vocal coach...the late Nico Castel, who was an amazing opera singer himself and was a coach at the Metropolitan Opera. So he came with incredible credentials but it just so happens that we shared the same Sephardic background.

Rabbi Hirsch: Oh, wow.

Sarah: And he had been a hazzan for some time and was an expert in Ladino and had one of the very first commercially published Ladino songbooks in America. And it's called the Nico Castel Ladino Songbook. And I was so lucky to be his student, just serendipitously. In between our opera coachings, he started to teach me some of the more traditional Ladino songs which I had not grown up with. And I just fell in love with the music to the point that I came back to America and continued studying with him and I put together a series of recitals. They were classical music recitals, opera recitals. But with each concert I had a section of classical Ladino music, and without fail, after every performance, audience members would come up to me to tell me that the Ladino portion was their favorite part.

And it really got me thinking, "Why did that music resonate more with the audience than...?" No offense to Mozart, but there was something in the Ladino music that reached the audience in a different way and it was clearly because I was presenting it differently. It somehow reached my soul in a different way that I could sing it with more passion and it came out of my body in a different way than the opera music. And so after a while, I realized, "You know what? I like the Ladino music better too." I look back now and I can be proud of myself, but back then I was just some naive 20-year-old who thought, "Oh, isn't everybody allowed to start a rock band?" If I knew then what I know now. But I had this vision, I had this idea, I saw the need and I had the passion for it.

Rabbi Hirsch: Thank you so much. Our show's theme is based on a verse from the story of Esther. She's become queen, she's Jewish, but she's been hiding her identity. It's the dramatic story that we get to hear every year around Purim. And then Haman, the villain, he's plotting to kill all the Jews of Persia. So Mordecai, Esther's uncle, it's really this peak moment of the drama. He comes to her and says, "Now. Now is the moment that you have to reveal your identity and go to your husband, go to the king, and you have to save your people, Esther." And then he says this line to her, he says these words to her, "Who knows? Maybe it was just for this moment that you're in this position of leadership." So I'm curious, Sarah, what's that moment for you with that story where you found yourself and the person who could lead in the right place at the right time?

Sarah: I was 22 or 23, I think. I was right out of college and it was my very first job. I was working for the now defunct National Foundation for Jewish Culture. And it was a great place to work as somebody who was fascinated by the nexus between Judaism and arts and culture. And one of the things I was tasked with was putting together a symposium on new Jewish musics, plural on the word

music, because there was an understanding in the early 2000s that there was really an explosion of different Jewish musical styles. So the foundation thought it would be really interesting to put together 20 of the most cutting edge Jewish musicians of the time with 20 very cutting edge Jewish arts and culture producers and to get everybody in the same room and see what could happen. So not for lack of trying, I searched high and low for Sephardic musicians and artists who could match the creativity that was coming out of the Ashkenazi side at that time.

This was early 2000s, it was like the explosion of klezmer music. Every iteration of klezmer you could find, klezmer punk, klezmer jazz, klezmer funk, klezmer anything. And there were incredible musicians, especially in New York at that time. It was a great time to be a Jewish musician in New York. And this symposium was amazing. The creativity that was flowing out of it was just awe-inspiring. But like I said, I could not find Sephardic musicians to match the creativity coming out of the more Ashkenazi arts and culture world. At the one hand, I was so inspired by all of these Ashkenazi and klezmer musicians, and on the other, I was just so deeply, deeply saddened that there weren't cutting edge Sephardic artists for whatever reason. And because it's my own personal heritage, it really struck me and it made me very, very sad and almost embarrassed. And so I kid you not, the week after the symposium ended, I gave notice to the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, and I said, "Listen, if nobody else is doing this, this is my moment. I have to step in." And shortly thereafter, I started my first Ladino rock band.

Rabbi Hirsch: That's amazing. You saw the need and then you went out to make it but not everyone would have the boldness to say, "Well, no one else is doing this, so I'm going to be the one who's going to have to do it."

Sarah: Yeah. I can't say my mom was too thrilled. I had a single mom, and when I came home, again, early 20s, and you're supposed to be figuring out your life, and I tell her, "I want to have a Ladino rock band." I don't know if she was more shocked that I wanted to start a rock band or that I was a Ladino rock fan.

Rabbi Hirsch: That's great. Esther's story stands out for me because she's a woman in a position of leadership in a period in Jewish history when that opportunity is so rare. You think about all the women who are in the Torah, in the Bible, who don't even get a name, and Esther has her own book. She has her own story. And even though she has some limitations because she's the queen married to the very powerful king in that patriarchal society, she still gets to really be in a leadership position that distinguishes her a lot. And I know that's why I connect with her story and why a lot of Jewish women, Jewish leaders do as well. I'm curious, have you experienced any barriers in your work and your experiences as a woman in particular in your field? I'm also a musician. I love to play guitar and to sing and to lead groups in singing.

And I've bumped up periodically against this Jewish Halakhah legal belief held in certain Orthodox communities that a man, a male identified individual, shouldn't hear the solo singing of the voice of a woman. That prohibition is called Kol Isha. So I'm just wondering, that's from my experience, have you come up against any of that, whether with music or as a woman leading in this area overall?

Sarah: Absolutely. Especially when I was first starting off, I know a lot of people didn't quite know what to do with me because there weren't a lot of Ladino musicians, period, let alone women. And so there were two times that I can remember, but it was a long time ago that I had performances canceled on me when suddenly people realized I was a woman, as if my name didn't give it away. So I chuckled at that. But to be honest, at this point, I have really built a lot of my platform on raising women's voices in Sephardic culture specifically. So I think anyone who wants to engage me in work knows what my platform is. But I have really made it a point to emphasize certain voices in my work.

For example, one of the most traditional Sephardic songs, it's sung at every celebration... You might know it. It's called Abram Avinu. And it has a very famous chorus all about Abraham, our father. And so a lot of people assume it's about Abram and it's about his birth story. And you actually read between the lines and you realize it's about his mother, who is one of those unnamed characters in the Torah.

Rabbi Hirsch: Oh, wow.

Sarah: So Terah's wife, she's never mentioned by name. We only hear of her name in some rabbinic writings later. Her name is Amathlai. She is really the heroine of this story because when King Herod pronounced that new Jewish babies would be killed, she knew that she was pregnant with Abram, that he was going to be this great man, and so she went off into the woods by herself during the pregnancy and gave birth alone. She didn't even tell her husband. And she did everything she could to...

Rabbi Hirsch: That's all in the song?

Sarah: It is in the song, actually. To protect her womb and to protect our future leader, Abram. So she's not even named in the song but that's what the song is about. And so whenever I sing that in front of mixed audiences, now I make sure that people know it's actually about Amathlai and not about Abram.

I also write songs about women who have been inspiring to me, for example, the great Doña Gracia Nasi, who was a 16th century heroine. She was like the Harriet Tubman of Renaissance Europe. She was a Crypto-Jew, one of those Jews who pretended to be Catholic to save her life but she retained her Jewish customs in secret. And she became the wealthiest woman in Europe for a time. She married another Crypto-Jew who was the leader of this huge banking

fortune. Sadly, she was widowed as a single mother at age 28 and she inherited this incredible wealth. And what did she do with her money? She could have done anything, but she chose to use it to create an underground network to save Jews escaping the Inquisition and she brought them to safety in the Ottoman Empire. She saved hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of Sephardic Jews who desperately needed her help. And she was a woman. She was just incredible.

So I wrote a whole song about her and I named an album after her. I want to make sure that people know these stories of these great women, Jewish women, Sephardic women, and I think there are a lot of ways to express that through the music.

Rabbi Hirsch: What roadblocks do you think still exist for women in leadership?

Sarah: On a larger, macro level, I think that I haven't been so challenged by being a woman specifically because there's no precedent really for this path that I've chosen for myself. I'm just doing my own thing.

Rabbi Hirsch: Oh, that's interesting. Yeah.

Sarah: So because I've been one of the few doing this work as a woman, I have not found so many roadblocks because I'm a woman. I've found many roadblocks because I'm an artist, and certainly being in the cultural arts is never easy for anybody. But in Sephardic culture specifically, it's actually very progressive when it comes to women, and the Kol Isha issues that I encountered really were not from the Sephardic side.

Rabbi Hirsch: Oh, interesting.

Sarah: In fact, women were singing all the time, especially in communal settings. So that has been less of an issue for me. I think on a micro level, something that I contend with and I think is one of the biggest challenges for women in leadership positions, is access to childcare.

Rabbi Hirsch: Yes.

Sarah: If that problem were solved, gosh, women could do anything.

Rabbi Hirsch: It's really important that you mentioned that and something that we've talked about, both being moms of kids who are still at a younger age and resonates personally. But also we're lucky we have great support to be able to go and have the careers and do the things that we want to do. And there are so many people who are pulling themselves out of the workforce. They did so many studies after the pandemic, in particular about people who just couldn't step into roles of leadership or pursue dreams because they didn't have the access to the

childcare that they needed and the broken systems that aren't set up to be able to support us within our communities.

Sarah: Yeah, absolutely. In fact, in my fiscally sponsored projects, I always advocate for a budget line for childcare because I can't do this work if I don't have my children taken care of. To me, that's really one of the main things that stops women.

Rabbi Hirsch: That's amazing that you're doing that. And with Women of Reform Judaism, the organization that I head up, we're working on this issue every day too. We're doing a lot of work and focus on pay equity but also on paid family medical leave and that's something that I pay attention to as an area to advocate around and the way in which people are able to care for their kids, whether it's after a pregnancy, but also after an illness, whether it's short-term or otherwise. And women are so often, the caretakers, the caregivers in those situations, or the first phone call if a kid needs to get picked up from school with a fever and everything in between. So thinking about how that plays into being able to pursue the paths that we want to pursue.

You mentioned the Holocaust story and the Holocaust connection to your family story and your family history. We're talking a lot about antisemitism right now and the global rise in antisemitism. I'm wondering if you see any linkages either to the story of your family, the stories that you encounter through your work in Ladino culture and Sephardic culture and to bring all of that out and just what you're seeing today.

Sarah: There's a memory I have that is seared into my brain... As early as I can remember, Salonika, which is the sister city to Monastir, and it was known as the Jerusalem of the Balkans, it had the largest Sephardic population in the region. In fact, it was predominantly Sephardic. So even the non-Jews had to learn how to speak Ladino to be able to communicate with the huge Jewish population. And during World War II, when 94% of Greece was completely obliterated the Jewish community, the entire city of Salonika was razed, just burnt to the ground. But one synagogue was left standing, this one synagogue, because the Nazis used it as a Red Cross shelter. And on the facade of the synagogue bears my family name. It was built with the help of the Monastirly community by Yitzhak Aroeste. So to grow up with this story, knowing that my family's heritage, I had many relatives also in Solanika, that they were essentially wiped off the face of the earth and yet the one structure that was left standing bears my name.

And so to grow up with that weight and that feeling of responsibility, you can't grow up with that being your family story and not do something with that. You can't just sit idly by. To me, that just represents just so much of my work. I am standing still. Sephardic tradition still stands. Ladino still stands. My family still stands. We have to prove to the world that we are still standing. And that informs so much of the music that I write, the way that I lead my workshops and



I try to put my message out into the world. We can't back down, we have to still stand, and we have to share these stories. We have not been through the Inquisition, the Balkan Wars, the Holocaust, so much just to fall down now. No, we have to stay standing.

Rabbi Hirsch: That's such a powerful image and one that can represent the work that we need to do. And the work that you're doing today, it's amazing.

Sarah: There's a beautiful expression in Ladino... "all the fingers of the hand are not the same." And I love that expression because you need all those fingers to make a hand but every finger is different. And you can be Sephardic, you can be Ashkenazi, you can be Mizrahi, you could be this, you could be that. There's so many different ways to frame Judaism, and most of those terms really don't mean what people think they mean.

Rabbi Hirsch: Sure.

Sarah: But the point is that you need the full spectrum of the diversity of Jewish life to make that hand. We're all part of the same hand, whether we come from the same background or not.

Rabbi Hirsch: What an inspiring note to end on from Sarah Aroeste. I'm 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 Judasim @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. All other music in this episode is courtesy of Sarah Aroeste. Thanks for listening. We'll have more Just For This moments next time.