

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 guests are Rabbi Sam Frank and Rabbi Rena Singer. Together, they are the inspiring creators of Modern Ritual.

This past weekend, around the world, Jewish communities celebrated the holiday of Purim. Here on our podcast, we are Purim super fans. Our name Just For This is a phrase from the biblical Book of Esther. That same book tells the story of Purim, the story of Esther's heroism and bravery in the face of antisemitism and patriarchy. We celebrate and observe Purim in a variety of ways. Many may join in a public chanting or singing or recitation of Megillat Esther, the Scroll of Esther, the words and story within that biblical book. Some dress up and wear costumes reflecting how Esther initially hid and then revealed her Jewish identity. Some enjoy or take part in a comedic Purim play or spiel. Others share platters of food, pastries, and treats with friends and family.

These are all customs and rituals that have evolved over time and place. Jewish ritual is the way we express a practice or law and bring it into our lives. It's how Judaism lives in the world. Ritual evolves for the moment with the person in the place where it happens around the world in different communities, in a synagogue, or at home.

Rabbi Sam Frank and Rabbi Rena Singer started Modern Ritual as an Instagram account in the spring of 2017. Their goal is to inspire and educate people on how to build beautiful, modern Jewish lives. It has become a platform for feminist ritual and representation of women in spiritual leadership and much more than that.

In our wide-ranging conversation, we spoke about the rich visual community they have created. They emphasize opportunities for people to connect with Jewish practice, both in a synagogue and on their own, in a community or at home. They also feature relatable and current images. While they're often showcasing particular objects, they also frequently get out from behind the camera and are part of the content themselves. As two female-identified rabbis, their public, proud presence is a powerful expression of leadership.

Women of Reform Judaism, the women's affiliate of the Reform Jewish Denomination that I am proud to lead, is rooted in feminist ritual, both in the synagogue and at home. For several generations, many women connected with their spiritual lives, primarily through their local sisterhood or women's group.

In large part, because women could not pursue ordination as clergy, they could not ascend to lay leadership roles within their congregations or even in the broader Jewish world. Sisterhood Shabbat was and is a common annual event in many communities. Originally, these were a once-a-year opportunity for male-identified clergy to Seat the Bema to women leaders.

Today much has changed, and there are many more opportunities available for women to take on roles of spiritual leadership, and yet we still have a long way to go to change perceptions about who is fit to be the public face of Jewish ritual practice. Modern Ritual and its creators are adding to this conversation in nuanced and significant ways. Our two guests also have impactful rabbimates and people they are serving beyond Modern Ritual. We began our conversation with me asking each of them to share a little bit more about themselves.

Rabbi Frank: I'm Rabbi Samantha Frank (she/her), and in addition to running Modern Ritual, I sort of split my time with a couple of different Jewish communities in New York, one in DC. So I think I fall under the category of community rabbi pretty well.

Rabbi Singer: Nice. And I'm Rabbi Rena Singer. I'm currently an associate rabbi at Temple Sholom of Chicago. In July, I'm moving to San Francisco to start at Congregation Emanu-El, and I've been working on Modern Ritual with Samantha for many years now.

Rabbi Hirsch: Thank you both so much. It's very cool that Modern Ritual is what I became familiar with the two of you from, but you're both having really robust community and congregational rabbimates and serving in those ways as well. Could you tell us the story about how you came up with Modern Ritual?

Rabbi Singer: We were in rabbinical school. It was a special moment in time. Kind of the social media world, specifically Instagram was really just taking off. We were thinking about how could we convey the richness and beauty of what we were learning to people who we were meeting in our congregations.

And I think at the time, I was an intern at Westchester Reform Temple, and I was sitting with a group of girls who were preparing for their B'nai Mitzvah, and they were talking about how much they loved Instagram, and I was like, "If there was a Jewish Instagram, would you follow it?" And they were like, "Yeah, maybe, possibly."

And Samantha and I both just loved kind of the beauty of all of the pictures we were seeing and how fun and joyful it was. And it was kind of before we thought of the internet as a really toxic place. And yeah, so that's a little bit how it started.

Rabbi Frank: Totally. So Rena had this great idea, and she came to me, I think, in the HUC library where I was probably supposed to be doing my Hebrew Bible homework.

And instead, I was on Instagram, and Rena said, "Let's bring what we love to the people where they are." And I said, "Okay, let's do it."

Rabbi Hirsch: So you talk about meeting in rabbinical school and starting Modern Ritual while you were in school. Tell me each of you a little bit about your path to study at HUC. You were both on the New York campus, right?

Rabbi Frank: Yes, absolutely. So I grew up in a Jewish community, this is Sam, that was really social justice focused, really social action focused, and not so big on the ritual, but it was a place where we had conversations about things that really mattered. So for example, I remember being 13 or 14 and learning about the Jewish idea of B'tzelem Elohim, that everyone's created in God's image and that Jewish value superseded anything else in the Torah that might say, that certain people shouldn't get married.

This was before gay marriage was legal. And for me, it was really clear that Jewish values actually meant something in the world. I had a really great rabbi growing up, but someone who was a man, I never really thought about it for myself. I thought I would do public health, public health research. That's what I did after college for a few years. And when I started to really discern what did I want to get a second degree in? Did I really want to get a Ph.D. and then be really super active in my synagogue, or did I really want to go to rabbinical school, learn some of the Jewish texts and ideas that I didn't get so much growing up, and get to be a part of a Jewish community leader?

Then, it became clear that going to rabbinical school would be the right next thing. I'll say, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg was one of my rabbis at Hillel, and she's so amazing. And she was someone who just was really spiritually honest, and that had a lot of meaning to me in a challenging time in my life. So I decided I would apply to rabbinical school. And I'll say that Rena and I met when we were first accepted at an accepted students get together, but unfortunately, the seeds of friendship were not planted. I was not friendly, but happily, we moved past that.

Rabbi Singer: Wait, we actually... Okay, I'm sorry. This is important. We actually met even before that.

Rabbi Frank: Before that. Yes.

Rabbi Singer: Yes.

Rabbi Frank: True.

Rabbi Singer: Yes.

Rabbi Frank: So true.

- Rabbi Singer: Which was when we were at...
- Rabbi Frank: East End Temple.
- Rabbi Singer: ... East End Temple, and we sat next to each other. This was even before rabbinical school. We sat next to each other. We were the young people in the room, and then I tried to talk to Samantha because I'm a big services talker talking while the service is happening, and Samantha was not having any of it. And she was like-
- Rabbi Frank: I'm a real rule follower.
- Rabbi Singer: Yeah.
- Rabbi Frank: I was like, "We are praying now."
- Rabbi Hirsch: Yeah, I am definitely, when I'm not leading the service, sometimes guilty of being a service talker as well, but that's because I love that story. Goldberg comes to talk to God, and Cohen comes to talk to Goldberg. So there are different reasons why people come to Shul. It's good.
- Rabbi Frank: Totally, totally.
- Rabbi Singer: Absolutely. And I think that actually connects to becoming a rabbi because one of the reasons I felt so comfortable talking away while the service is happening is because both of my parents are rabbis. And so I was raised very much with this kind of behind-the-scenes view into what do rabbis actually do and what does it mean to kind of devote your life to organizing a community. And my synagogue in Seattle was also very progressive and at the forefront of different social justice issues.
- And so it felt extremely relevant, but also living in... because we lived in Seattle and I went to a public school, I heard all the time from other kids about how terrible religion is and how it causes wars, and it's all about hating people. And I was like, "This completely does not match up with my experience of what's happening here." Obviously, I had to go through my own journey to figure out what does it mean to go into the same career that my parents went into, but really I saw myself as somebody who could take what is beautiful about the Jewish world and become a bridge for people who struggle with connecting spiritually or feel like religion or religious community is not for them.
- Rabbi Hirsch: I was going to ask either of you to comment on what you just said, Rena, which is the idea of taking what is beautiful and helping that be an access point for Judaism because for my outsider vantage point, as someone who follows Modern Ritual and sees what you put out there, that seems like a really wonderful way to sum up a lot of what you do on the platform.

Rabbi Singer: Yeah, I think that so much of strong Jewish growth and connection happens in your home when you're creating your own rituals and inviting people in and celebrating together. And I was at my friend's house the other day who's an artist, and she has such a beautiful kitchen, and they were talking about how she really feels like part of her artist's expression is making her home beautiful. And I was like, "Oh my God, I want to do that. I want to bring more beauty into my life."

But the only reason I was able to experience that was because I was in her home. And I think that that is a real power. The thing that can be amazing about social media is that it can bring you into people's homes and give you the tool to teach from a very personal perspective how you live your life in a way that is harder in a classroom setting and is harder... not impossible in a synagogue, but just very different.

Rabbi Hirsch: Yeah. I think I found myself saying a lot, I think that one of my best rabbi qualities is just being a regular person that you can have a conversation with. And that idea of welcoming people into your home is sort of how do you model it, especially if people are stepping into rituals or practices that might not be something that they grew up with or might be familiar, they might be afraid of being judged about it. So to give them a model for that.

Rabbi Frank: And the only thing I would add here too is that we live in a world and I think Instagram really heightens this where aesthetics matter, and my growing up, my religious school happened in a school like a local public elementary school classroom. I wasn't in synagogue buildings. And the truth is that synagogues, any building, truly, is informed by the time it was created. And I think when Rena and I are thinking about Modern Ritual and who we want to be talking to and who we want to be sharing the beauty of Judaism with its people who may or may not feel that comfortable in a synagogue. And to sound totally superficial, but I think it really matters.

The aesthetics matter. And if you go into a synagogue and it just doesn't feel, I don't know... and it feels dated, then I think it kind of reinforces this idea that a lot of Judaism is outdated, and when we read the Torah about this ancient vessel dwelling system for holiness, it's sort of like, "Well, what does this have to do with me?" And so if Instagram can be a place to say, "This has so much to do with us, or it has so much to do with Rena and I, and here's how it could have something to do with you if you want it." People are seeking spiritual depth in the spiritual home. Hopefully, we're giving them ideas or opportunities to think about creating their own spiritual home at home.

Rabbi Hirsch: For folks who either aren't as familiar with Instagram or haven't checked out your account before, could you tell us sort of when you're explaining, describing Modern Ritual what it is and does it have a life beyond the Instagram account for either of you, either formally or informally?

Rabbi Singer: Yeah, so Modern Ritual is currently an online educational platform that we use to help model fresh, relevant, beautiful, often feminist Judaism. We do the majority of our teaching by posting and storying on Instagram, making videos, all of that. We have done some classes that we invite people to through our platform, but we've done them not on the Instagram platform but elsewhere.

But I would say it's constantly interacting with the rest of our professional and personal lives of people say, "I'm going through this. I saw you posted about this on Modern Ritual. How would you feel about talking about this? Or I'm coming to your synagogue because I connected with your Instagram." That kind of thing happens all the time. So there's definitely a lot of fluidity.

Rabbi Frank: I would just add that Instagram as a medium is changing, technology is changing, and we are changing and growing. And so... one of the conversations Rena and I have frequently is what do we want this to be, not just for the community of Modern Ritual, but also for ourselves? We want to continue to be in conversation with people, but we are evolving in how we want to share.

So that's one of the other exciting pieces. So for people who aren't on Instagram or a lot of people in the past few months have said to me, Rena, I'm sure people have said this to you and Liz too, that they've left social media or they've left Instagram. I think we still want to be in conversation, so we're exploring how to do that, and that's really exciting.

Rabbi Hirsch: You started to get into something that I wanted to ask you about a little bit, which is social media has the ability to be both this amazing connector, right. You mentioned somebody coming into one of your synagogues because they connected with you online at Modern Ritual and liked the type of content you were sharing, the way that you were expressing Jewish values, and putting that out in the world.

But social media...has the ability to be really, really toxic. And I wonder how you navigate that, if you have any stories or experiences to share about that, or if that's something that you're really living in right now because of the way that the conversations online and in social media are happening since October 7th.

Rabbi Singer: I think it is also important to say not only has our relationship to social media been changing a lot, but also it's specifically changed after October 7th. Right now, we're not really talking about how beautiful Judaism is and what does it mean to live Jewishly at home. We're trying to navigate, do we talk about those things right now?

Do we just talk about Israel and Palestine? What is our role in this moment? It's really hard. We've put a few things out there, and we get... people get really mad on all ends of the political spectrum. And it's worth it to us to say our truth, but right now, it all just feels very different. And so we're kind of just sitting in that difference and figuring out what's next.

Rabbi Frank: I'll just say this. I think a few years ago, we started Modern Ritual when we were in rabbinical school together, our lives just looked different. The time that we had on our hands to be online was just a lot more flexible than it is now that we're both working. And we were able to create a space where the comments were really well attended to by us that when people said things that were just disrespectful or rude, we could model responding with graciousness and affirming the values of speaking with generosity, even online. Both before October 7th, our ability to sort of be moderators have shifted already. Since October 7th, the war is like, it's really personal.

It's personal for people who are commenting, and it's personal for us. In my mind, there's sort of two questions. One is, what type of community are we building, or what type of community would we like to build, and what can we build? And then a second question, which is how do we care for ourselves when it comes to Modern Ritual, which is not the only space where we're talking about Israel and Palestine with people, which is in our own personal lives, which is in our families, which is in our congregational work. So I think when we're at our best, we're reminding people that, "The people reading what you say on social media are humans, and we all share that no matter what we think or believe."

Rabbi Hirsch: Well, maybe we could talk about one of the aspects of your content that I love and really resonate with, which is the Shabbat affirmations, the polls that you do regularly on Shabbat. For folks not as familiar, if you could explain sort of what that is, and I'd love to know where you came up with doing that idea and what kind of responses you've gotten back from people around that.

But one thing I've really noticed about those is that you really emphasize Shabbat as a day for self-care and making sure that you take care of yourself. And perhaps that's a little bit related to some of the challenges you are expressing about showing up in online Jewish spaces in this moment right now, knowing that it can sometimes be the opposite of that.

Rabbi Singer: Well, this is where I get to hype Samantha because she is the brilliant queen behind the Shabbat polls and quizzes. She is both the brilliant inventor of them and the incredible person who does them every week.

Rabbi Frank: I just like to say that necessity is the mother of all invention. I think they came at some point during COVID when we were really uninspired. We did not... We were like, "What are we going to post about? What can we say that's meaningful, what's useful?" And Shabbat is the eternal gift, and it felt like this is something that we can do. I think it's so interesting that you say that it feels really self-carey, which I think that's just the language of a lot of the other spaces that I'm in.

The goal is actually to connect people to different ideas that have been passed down for thousands of years around Shabbat, that this is a day where we care

for our souls, and that sometimes caring for our body is a way we care for our souls and just helping people make that really obvious. So basically, also, for anyone who doesn't see these every Friday or almost every Friday on the Instagram Story, which is sort of something that's available for 24 hours, we present a series of polls. "This Shabbat, I'm leaning into joy or rest." Those are two things that Maimonides says we should do on Shabbat. We should have Oneg Shabbat. We should have joy. And Shabbat is for menucha, for rest.

Even though we're not getting into the details necessarily of where these ideas come from, we're inviting people to consider what Shabbat can be. And I think another thing. It goes back to what Rena said before about how we really believe in creating the Jewish life that you want. And I think so many people think, "Well, I don't do Shabbat because I don't go to the synagogue." And lots of amazing, beautiful things happen in synagogue, but that doesn't mean that that's the only place where Shabbat is. Shabbat doesn't live in the synagogue. Shabbat lives wherever Jews are and wherever Jews choose to honor Shabbat.

Rabbi Hirsch: That's awesome. I want to talk about how feminism shows up in Modern Ritual, and that's something that's obviously of importance at Women of Reform Judaism, the organization that I head up, the lay feminist arm of the Reform movement. And one thing that we love about Modern Ritual is you're often walking around or taking photos of The Torah: A Women's Commentary, which is a project of Women of Reform Judaism. So I love when that nice green cover shows up in your feed, but I'd love just to hear a little bit about how you see Modern Ritual as a feminist endeavor both through the content that you share. And I think maybe reflect on, for me, at least part of being a woman, a rabbi, and a leader is helping people see it to be it, and understand that they have the ability to tap into things that might not have been accessible to them.

Rabbi Singer: Yeah, I think there's something that's so funny where if you are involved in the Jewish world, if you're a Jewish professional, you know that there are now so many women rabbis and women, and there have been all of these generations of women who did incredible groundbreaking work so that our generation could thrive as women leaders. Almost every week, I have a conversation with somebody who says, "Oh, I didn't know that women could be rabbis." And so there's still this discrepancy.

Part of what we looked at when we were starting Modern Ritual is that if you do a Google image search for the word rabbi, you'll get 4 million images of Orthodox men. I still think that despite all of the extraordinary work that has been done, for the larger culture, there's still a vast majority of people who don't know that we have this extraordinary feminist reality and tradition within Judaism. And part of what social media does effectively is it gets a message to a larger group of people.

And so I think that particularly the images of us as women doing traditional Jewish things, carrying a Torah, I think what's especially important to me or has



been important in the past also is also the way we're dressed. Kind of going back to what you said about being a normal person, that we can be women rabbis who wear tank tops and read the Torah. These are things that can fit into our day-to-day lives and that we convey that in every part of who we are is really important to us.

Rabbi Frank: The only other thing I'll add is obviously representation is so amazing and so important, and I didn't consider being a rabbi for a long time, I think probably until I had met a woman rabbi and something that Rena and I think about a lot and try and balance sometimes the images you see of us with images of maybe just ritual objects like Challah. We're two white women, so we're not representing the racial diversity of the Jewish community. We can't change who we are, obviously, but we can try and balance what joyful, proud, feminist, Jewish messaging can look like.

Rabbi Hirsch: I think we should probably talk about Esther because she's the inspiration for our podcast. So the title Just For This comes from that verse from Esther 4:14 where she's become queen but has been hiding her Jewish identity, and her uncle Mordecai comes to her and says, "Now's the moment when the Jews' lives are at risk from Haman's plot, and maybe it's Just For This moment that you're in a position of leadership." So have either both of you had a moment like that where you feel like, "I'm in this place for this moment where I can lead?" And it could be within the context of Modern Ritual, within the context of your rabbinic work, or something else that you're involved in.

Rabbi Frank: I had an internship on our college campus, and I was the Reform rabbinic intern, and it was really a large college. A lot of people would come to Shabbat dinner, and someone always had to give a d'var Torah, and I was so intimidated by this group of people. The college was a very elite place. It felt like I really had to be on my best, and as a Reform Jew, even though I was there as an intern, there was also a culture of Conservative and Orthodox Judaism that really dominated the space.

One of the weeks that Brett Kavanaugh was being put onto the Supreme Court also aligned either with the Torah portion where Rebekah consents to going to meet Isaac, or, and I can't remember now, or with the Torah portion that includes the rape of Dinah. And I was so terrified to talk about sexual assaults and to stand on a chair in front of a group of 200 people, and I'm not... my voice isn't very loud. There were all these different dynamics, and it was Shabbat so I couldn't use a microphone, and I felt like that is the only thing that can be talked about this week. Everyone here has been following it. People know about it.

The Torah is not giving us an out of like, "Here's a different way to talk about human dignity or something." It is important now of all times to talk about this. And then people came up to me and were like, "We never talk about the importance of consent here at Hillel, and it's college." I don't know about your college experiences, but that's when people are pushing boundaries. That's one

of the most important times to talk about consent and to remind people that that is not just an important human value but that there is Jewish value around it as well.

Rabbi Singer: I'm very inspired. We are not posting a lot right now. But I do feel really proud of what we've posted in this time when social media has really served to polarize people that we really are saying, "Our hearts can be broken for Israelis and also at the same time must be broken for Palestinians. That this isn't really a two-sided issue. That so many of us are on the same side of wanting peace and flourishing for so many people."

I don't know. I think there was this narrative pretty quickly of like, "We can't say that right now. It's too soon." And to me, it's like, "No, we have to say it right now. We have to. Somebody has to say it right now." And so I think that that has been really important for me to using a little bit of that voice in a moment when it feels risky, and people are very, very upset and saying, "What does it mean to try to speak some truth in this space?"

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.