

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. My guest today is Dr. Cochav Elkayam-Levy.

What does it mean to be brave? As we continue to look to Queen Esther as a model of leadership, we can attempt to imagine ourselves in her place at that very moment when she has been hiding her identity, concealing the fact that she's Jewish. When Mordecai approaches her with the words that inspire our podcast, maybe it is just for this moment that you find yourself in a position of leadership.

Esther does step up, take action, and chooses to approach her husband, the king, at risk to her own life. That's due to royal protocol that no one could approach the king for a meeting or request without first being invited by him. As we've reflected before, this is a highly patriarchal, hierarchical system and that places Esther's bravery in context. One midrash -- a storytelling creative attempt to envision what is happening internally for our hero -- it suggests that when Esther first saw King Achashverosh, she felt faint and afraid -- with good reason.

Another midrash imagines her praying for strength before approaching the king. At such difficult moments of exercising leadership, we look to Esther's example. We take a deep breath, we overcome our fears, and we turn to prayer.

This week we speak with a leader in Israel who has stepped up and spoken out about violence against women, beginning with Hamas' attacks on October 7th and continuing to this day.

We note with particular sadness that this week marks just over six months since the beginning of the war, a war that threatens the safety, lives, and well-being of civilians in Israel and in Gaza. From the earliest days of the war, there were credible reports of sexual violence against Israeli women and children on October 7th. What's more, every day that the hostages remain in Gaza, they live under threat of sexual and physical violence.

My organization, Women of Reform Judaism, was one of the first in North America to speak out against the gender-based violence following the October 7th attacks. We unequivocally believe all victims of sexual violence and rape. We believe Israeli women. We believed them from the start of the war and we continue to believe them. And yet the international community has remained

largely silent or attempted to deny the accounts and discredit those who are speaking out.

And yet brave leaders are raising their voices. Our guest today, Dr. Cochav Elkayam-Levy, is one of the people leading this difficult and important work. She's the Sophie Davis Post-Doctoral fellow on Gender Conflict Resolution and Peace at the Leonard David Institute for International Relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She's the founding head of the Dvora Institute for Gender and Sustainability Studies and a Senior Fellow at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

She established and leads the Civil Commission on October 7th crimes by Hamas against women and children, which she discusses more in our conversation. For her work in this area, she was recently awarded a medal of distinction from the Peres Center for Peace & Innovation, and she will receive the Israel Prize, the country's highest cultural honor, in the area of Solidarity, later this May.

I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Elkayam-Levy this past winter when I led a feminist solidarity mission to Israel. We started our conversation with me asking her to introduce herself and share about her background and current work.

Cochav: I teach international law, human rights, feminist theories, climate justice here in Israel at Hebrew University and the Reichman University. I'm also the peace and conflict resolution fellow of the Hebrew University. I've established an institute in gender and sustainability, and I've been very involved in the protests here in Israel before the 7th of October because we really are still struggling to secure gender equality here in Israel.

Rabbi Hirsch: So much of what has inspired me about getting to know you and hearing your story is you're someone who is so rooted in this work and in this field, but then when October 7th happened, you jumped to action. Could you tell us the story of that?

Cochav: I'm still thinking about how everything developed so quickly. I'm still thinking about my actions, trying to reflect back how quickly things have developed. I'm now even a bit angry of the fact that we needed to act, that we needed to prove something, that we needed to expose ourselves to those very traumatic videos, images. So I'll start from the beginning. I was actually with my father. He was hospitalized on the 7th of October and I started to get reports on the horrific scenes in the southern part of Israel.

Of course, I knew and already other international legal scholars knew that we're seeing crimes against humanity committed before our eyes, and this is going to develop to a big international event, that will involve the international community, I mean. That many international organizations are going to take a place in responding to the atrocities that we're seeing. Of course, the number of

hostages that were the women and children that were taken into Gaza, entire families, elderly people, young women.

It was very difficult. And honestly, Liz, I didn't think there is going to be an issue with international community or international UN organizations. I really thought that they would respond quickly. That many of the organizations, especially those related to women's rights and children's rights, will respond and condemn the crimes and will stand with us, will offer help, will express solidarity. I find myself oftentimes this past few weeks saying, "There are people behind governments. Don't forget us. We're here. We are human beings."

And I feel like that has been forgotten in many ways. And so very early after the atrocities, understanding that they are not responding, they are not condemning the crimes, I gathered a group of experts. I very naively thought that perhaps they're lacking information, perhaps they're lacking credible information, perhaps they don't understand and we need to report. I can do this. I felt like I can do this. I can report. I know how to write to them.

We prepared three documents. One was a civil petition. It was important for me to give a voice to women wherever they are. Thousands of women have joined this petition. And the second one was a letter in the name of civil society, just giving a voice to women's organizations. And the last document was a legal report, a very brief legal report of eight pages signed by more than 180 international law professors and human rights experts that have really outlined what we knew, the most credible information that we had and the kind of international violations that we've seen.

It was then that I felt like the need to see with my own eyes. I can't draft this report without seeing it myself, and I went through Telegram groups. It was a very traumatizing experience. Again, looking back, I ask myself, how come you did that? I'm not a brave person.

So anyway, this report and these two other documents and petitions were sent to every UN agency that is responsible on women's rights and to children's rights, UN Women, UNICEF, special rapporteurs, special working groups, special mandate holders, whoever we could.

And I sent it personally from my Hebrew University account, believing that they will respond, believing that they will offer help. It took weeks for them to even respond. Most of them did not respond to this day. At a certain point, when I realized that they're not responding, I told my colleagues and my team, "Listen, we have a historical mission. We have to document everything ourselves. We have to preserve the historical record of what's going on, especially experiences of women are usually denied, especially experiences of sexual abuse are denied. And we have to keep it and we have to do everything in our power to document this, to make sure the truth is kept and meticulously so."

I decided on the establishment of an archive under the most compelling international norms. And I can tell you that I didn't understand what I'm taking upon myself because it has developed to be one of the hardest things that I've ever led in my life, and I've done some hard things.

Rabbi Hirsch: You jumped into action when you saw both that you had the expertise and the background to be able to organize those letters and reports and to send them in. And then you heard nothing back, right? You heard nothing back for such a long time. So what did you do next? I know you've been then now speaking throughout the world. What was the next step?

Cochav: So the next step was that I was actually invited by Bonot Alternativa, the protest movement here in Israel, to represent them at the UN, to represent the women's movements at the UN before the CEDAW Committee. So the CEDAW Committee is the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. It's the most important committee in the world responsible for the formation of norms that protect women. And I was invited to speak there.

It wasn't supposed to be on the atrocities, but we took the opportunity to raise our voices to give a voice to the victims of the 7th of October. It was close to the events, to the attack. And so two things happened before that speech. One, a lot of people started sending me a lot of information. People heard in Israel that I'm going to speak at the UN. It was circulated in many groups and I started getting videos, images. "Cochav, have you seen that? Cochav, have you heard about?" It was a very difficult experience in itself.

The second thing that happened is that this committee, despite getting information from us, despite seeing all the horrific things that we've already seen, it released a statement not mentioning the 7th of October, not mentioning the hostages. Again, it's the most important committee on women's rights. For me, it was a devastating realization. People asked me, "Cochav, why are you surprised? It's the UN." People are very cynical about the UN, especially in the US and here in Israel.

But I was deeply surprised. I felt deeply betrayed for in the name of these victims, in the name of these poor women and children that have suffered so much. It was difficult. I want to say that I chose to teach international law and women's rights. I chose to teach about the international human rights system that was formed, established from the ashes of World War II and from the ashes of the Holocaust. And I believe that it wouldn't be difficult again to just express solidarity with the human suffering we've seen here in Israel.

And so once they released the statement and I got the information, I told them, perhaps the 7th of October disappeared in time itself. Perhaps we live in another planet of sorrow and agony. I described the kind of scenes that we were seeing here, and I told them that usually as women, we know already of the denial mechanism that are inflicted on us. And now we're seeing the same

denial mechanism inflicted on us collectively as Israeli women. And I asked them, is there international law for Israeli women?

Is it going to protect us? Are you going to stand by our side? I begged them to believe, essentially. I begged them to stand by us, perhaps only for myself also to restore the belief in this system. And I told them they are undermining in this regard, they're undermining the legitimacy of the international system. I told it with pain that I'm not going to even mention one resolution because we all know it. Both of us know it better than everyone. And we already have the laws in place and resolutions in place to protect women.

And after that, I decided on the establishment on the Civil Commission that will document the crimes, that will collect information, images, testimonies. And I can tell you now that we have the former Vice Director of the Yad Vashem Archive as our archive manager. She's phenomenal. And the staff of advocates that are experts in sexual violence against women and even tech experts because it's interesting that we need a lot of technological support.

Rabbi Hirsch:

You spoke about a couple things. First of all, that you had the initial faith and trust that the UN would validate, would support, would speak out in the international community and space for Israeli women. And for me also personally, that's been what's been so challenging about this moment. And we know, my organization, Women of Reform Judaism, we were speaking out from the earliest days of the war about the sexual violence and the abuse perpetrated against women and the challenges as we know, and they've only continued to emerge and to be validated by early testimonies.

And we see headlines now daily about this that it's very difficult for women to speak out when they've suffered this kind of abuse. And it's also extremely difficult because we know so many of the victims are not able to speak up whether they were killed or it's just so traumatic for them. And I think that that's such an important piece of what's going on here is the difficulty of sharing these stories. And you spoke about creating that archive and going out on your own essentially after that breach of trust with the UN and the international community to do that.

And that's extremely difficult to expose yourself, to expose other members of your staff to all of those really challenging materials that you're collecting.

Cochav:

Definitely. And I can tell you that one of the most important elements is the fact that we are experiencing such denial. The fact that we do not receive any empathy. The denial aspect is really fundamental. I just ended a conversation with an amazing scholar from the US. She has a lot of experience in international criminal law and in prosecution of war crimes. And I told her that a big aspect of it at the moment is that victims are afraid, are afraid to share their stories.

Amit Soussana. She's a returned hostage. She just shared the horrible sexual violence that she experienced and the kind of backlash that she received, the kind of criticism. I can tell you that I even get personal threats that are constantly trying to discredit my work, to discredit the work of the commission. And her credibility was questioned immediately, and she's a returned hostage. The haunting question that I had in my mind for weeks was, are we even human? Are we even human? Really I can cry understanding that we're not treated as human.

We are now seeing human suffering in Gaza that is also unbearable. And there is no but. I'll just say that very early after the 7th of October, we were demonized. We were dehumanized and demonized, and these two processes are deeply concerning. They indicate the failure of the international system, the failure to represent humanity.

And I do want to mention one positive development, which is the visit of the special representative of the UN on sexual violence. It's interesting, it was very hard for them as well. They were here in Israel and we've met with her team and they expressed their difficulties to act and to collect information in such a polarized environment. But I think the report was important. They've revealed the brutality, the extreme brutality, that we've seen here. The fact that bodies were found abused, mutilated, and burned in so many places. And the scenes that they've been exposed to demonstrated what we've been experiencing since the 7th of October.

And also, I think they have shown systematicity, like repeating patterns from place to place. And that was important as well. And I think also the fact that they highlighted the risk to our hostages. So that was a historical report. I think it was important and to build trust again between the UN system and people here in Israel and to us as Jewish people.

My hope is that we'll see change in that as well in the next chapter of Israel. Women must be in leading positions in the next chapter of Israel. We have to push for this together. Because frankly, I think I shared it with you, I feel like we've failed. We did everything in our power to make sure that women will be there. In the first week of the war actually, I prepared a list of 50 women, most prominent women in Israel because I knew that the emergency teams are being formed in these specific hours after the crisis. And I knew that the response teams are being formed and I wanted to make sure women are there. That we're not going through another crisis with not having women in the inner circles of decision-making.

And I fought for this. From the first week, I sent this list of women to the NSC, to the National Security Council. It's the most powerful agency that is leading the response to emergencies. I'm trying to be hopeful that we'll see change in that.

Rabbi Hirsch: You said so many important things. Just to start with what you're first talking about, women at the table and as decision makers at a time of emergency, I wish that that's what you could be focusing all your work on. I know that that's something that you have an expertise in and is truly, truly important.

And at the same time, you've had to really fill in this gap, whether it was the UN or anyone else, except for a few Jewish organizations and Israelis throughout the world, and then there are returned hostages who are speaking up for what happened on October 7th and then in the days following.

You highlighted, of course, the returned hostages who are beginning to speak about the continued sexual violence and the risk of that as the hostages continue to be held. It's important to emphasize that. There was so much, so many terrible things that you are documenting and publicizing and recording from October 7th itself. But as the hostages continue to be held in captivity, we're speaking today on the 181st day of the war since October 7th. And we hope and pray that in a few days when folks have the chance to hear our conversation that we won't need those prayers anymore. But we know that that's a huge part of why time is running out for the hostages is because of that continued risk of sexual violence against them.

Cochav: It's really our first most important moral obligation to bring them back. It's really unbearable, I can't even tell you. I go to sleep at night. I think because of everything I know, it's even more difficult to go to sleep thinking of them. If it's raining, I'm thinking, where are they? If it's cold, I'm thinking, are they cold?

Rabbi Hirsch: Another thing that I wanted to highlight that you said earlier in our conversation is reminding the world that there are people behind their governments. And that goes for everybody. And I think the challenge, you emphasized that there is a huge unbearable level of suffering going on in Gaza as well too. We would be the last to deny that as people who care about human rights and physical safety. And the challenge is the denial of what happened to Israelis and in particular women and children on October 7th and following. And that's where you need to make sure that we're holding everyone to account.

Cochav: Exactly. And I think it's important that Israel takes responsibility on this issue, but it's important also to emphasize that Hamas is a murderous regime. The Palestinians also do not deserve to be under this murderous regime. And they didn't deserve it before the 7th of October, nor did they deserve it after the 7th of October. So I think there should have been a global coalition to handle this case.

I said it very early after the 7th of October that I think if we were to lead this effort as women, we would've built international coalition. We wouldn't have done it alone. This is not something one nation can handle, bringing back the security to citizens of Israel and bringing back a security and prosperity to the citizens in Gaza.

Rabbi Hirsch: The theme of our podcast and the name just for this comes from that line which some of us have been thinking about in recent weeks because of Purim from the Book of Esther: "*Mi Yodea? Who knows? Maybe it's just for this moment that you find yourself in a position of leadership.*" And that's what's been inspiring me and all of the conversations I've been able to have so far with the amazing women leaders.

And you said a little earlier that you don't think of yourself as a brave person. And I think that that's how I want to come into the question about Esther is maybe if we got into Esther's mind as well too, she also might've said, "Well, I'm not a very brave person. I've been hiding my Jewish identity." And then she knows when it's the moment to act. So is there a moment that you've had or can you reflect on that connection to Esther and the experiences that you've had?

Cochav: Yes. You see my eyes are filling with tears. I feel like at the beginning when people told me that in Hebrew they say "*im l'eit hazot higat l'malchut.*" And I said, this is not a *malchut*. It was so difficult for me at the beginning. I felt like I just need to do this. There is no one doing this. I just need to do this. People told me, "Oh, this is your life mission." I was like, I couldn't even say it to myself. I was like, no, this is what I'm going to do in the next month. I could bear the thought of handling this very difficult mission for the next month.

I knew that this is what I have to do. So I didn't feel brave. It was just the necessity of the moment, the necessity of this moment in history to lead this effort, to give a voice to the victims, to make sure we are respectful to their memories, to their soul, to what they were a minute before they were attacked in this way, and not to erase everything that they have been through. And I felt despite the fact that it was difficult for me to say it, I just knew that this is what I need to do. This is my mission.

A few weeks ago, I got the Peres Award, from the Peres Institute for Peace & Innovation. They gave me a distinction, and I started the speech over there, that it was the first time that I was able to say that I feel privileged. This is my mission, just to give the voice. I really feel like I'm privileged to be able to give a voice to women and to those who suffer the most and to be able to do this in a respectful manner that will respect their memory and also to be leading this for our people. I feel like this is not just happening in Israel.

As you know, I'm very deeply concerned about the raising anti-Semitism around the world. I'm thinking about the world we're leaving for our children. I feel like what motivates me the most is making sure that we do our best in this moment in history to mend things.

Rabbi Hirsch: I so relate to that. It's really what motivates me as well too, is thinking that the actions that we take today as two women who are in the next generation of leaders who are coming into leadership at this moment, but what world are we



giving to our children and to the next generation? And this is when we're called upon to act. And we know even if we are not always feeling the most brave or that it's very challenging and very difficult, that this is the time to act and this is what we have to do.

Cochav: Exactly. And I feel like human rights activists all around the world before the 7th of October, we already know that we're seeing regression in many areas. I spoke this summer on the regression that we're seeing in the protection of the LGBTQ community all around the world. They are at the gravest risk they have ever experienced as a community.

Rabbi Hirsch: We've talked a lot about your current work and something that you mentioned that I wanted to ask you more about is that you studied Jewish women's spirituality and their movements and all of that, and I'm wondering if there's anything you want to share about that work, because I know that that really resonates and is of interest to me and others as well too.

Cochav: Thank you so much for asking this. These days I feel privileged to be asked about my work on religious liberties and belief liberties, and specifically the work of feminist religious movements around the world. Feminist women who have been brave to really question every hierarchy that religious institution have put forward to demand their place as human being, as women to be considered human.

Studying the work of feminist movements has been very inspiring to me. They are breaking the hardest obstacles. They are operating in what seems to be the most stable hierarchies. And gradually with persistence and determination, they're paving paths for their equality, for our equality.

Rabbi Hirsch: It's to your credit and the work that you're doing, that even if there were doors that were closed and people who wouldn't listen to what you're trying to share, that whether it's through the international community, through other countries and governments, and also through the partners, we've heard you loud and clear, and that's part of why we wanted to invite you to speak today is just to continue to amplify that voice and that message.

I know that as someone who connects with and understands women's spirituality, that we just want to offer a blessing to you for strength as you carry on in many generations. The spirit of Queen Esther, maybe a little bit of Queen Vashti too and her chutzpah, her boldness to have to make the choices, to stand up and to know when it's the moment to act, when it's the moment to speak.

And we are so honored that you are leading this work even in the most difficult of times, and we hope and pray one day it will be in times of peace and times where we can continue to make progress on all those issues.

Just For This: Season 1, Episode 6

- Cochav: Amen. Amen. Thank you so much, Liz. You're amazing, and I truly am appreciative of this opportunity to be here with you to discuss this and to share this experience outside of Israel, as well, with our sisters. Thank you so much.
- Rabbi Hirsch: 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 Judaism @wrj1913. Our show is produced by Sheir and Shim LLC. Special thanks to Lisa Pincus Hamroff, Aly Rubin, Rabbi Neil Hirsch, Liore, and Micah. Jen King designed our logo, and Eric Shimelonis wrote our theme music. Thanks for listening. We'll have more just for this moment next time.