

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 Anita Diamant.

What do we mean when we talk about Midrash? Midrash is a sacred genre of storytelling and creativity. Centuries ago and to this day, we collect imagined tales in attempts to fill in the gaps of our biblical text and tradition. We answer, "What if?" We wonder, "Why?" We ask, "What was she thinking in that moment?"

We get curious about thoughts, feelings, and interiority, aspects often lacking in our succinct biblical texts. We call these stories Midrash. For example, in the Bible, the book of Esther describes our central character as an orphan raised by her uncle Mordecai. Later rabbinic discussions in collections of Midrash are curious about Esther's parents. They want to know her backstory, the flashback scenes. So they imagine, albeit through their pre-modern heteronormative lens for picturing her two parents, that Esther's father died during her mother's pregnancy and her mother died during childbirth.

Earlier generations and collected volumes of Midrash are our own invitation into creativity. Each of us is invited into this practice, bring our own current lens and our own take on the text.

Anita Diamant is one of our foremost creators of modern feminist Midrash. She is a writer whose work includes fiction, journalism, essays and guidebooks to contemporary Jewish life. Inspired by a few lines from Genesis, her well-known novel, *The Red Tent*, tells the story of an obscure and overlooked character named Dinah, the only daughter of Jacob and Leah. Diamant uses modern Midrash as a tool to access the stories and experiences of women characters in the Bible whose perspectives are most often underrepresented or underarticulated in prior generations or iterations of our shared stories. She is also the founding president of Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters Community mikveh and Education Center in Massachusetts. This reinvention of the ancient Jewish tradition of mikveh, ritual immersion in water, is a kind of physical and ritual form of Midrash. As we look for creative, imaginative possibilities to see ourselves in ritual as well as text, we spoke about all of these things and more.

Anita: I have to say, I've been a Reform Jew since I was about 12. So when my parents joined a congregation, it became super meaningful to me when I joined NFTY in high school. It's a very formative part of my life. When people ask me what kind of Jew I am, I generally start with liberal Jew, member of a Reform congregation, which is still kind of a thing, how do you describe yourself as a Jew?

Rabbi Hirsch: Where did you grow up, and tell me a little bit more about the community and the congregation that you grew up in?

Anita: My family moved to Denver when I was about 12, and my brother was a little bit younger than me. We joined Temple Emanuel, which was the great big Denver Reform congregation when my brother was 12, and it was time for his Bar Mitzvah. I have to say my parents are survivors. Moved to the United States after the war, were not congregation members until we moved to Denver and it was time for my brother's Bar Mitzvah. It was a big churchy Reform congregation. I sang in the choir in the choir loft. There was an organ. I had a couple of great teachers I remember still from religious school, and then I fell in love with NFTY and found a way to be Jewish that was meaningful to me. When I met my now husband of many, many years, he wasn't Jewish, and I realized how important it was to me that if we were to have children it was important to me that I'd be able to pass that along, and I really didn't know how to do that.

My Jewish education was pretty weak, and while I was very strongly identified Jewishly, growing up, everything good was Jewish. So Beethoven was Jewish and symphonic music was Jewish, and Italian food was Jewish. So culturally everything was Jewish, but there was really very little observance besides Hanukkah candles and a very rushed Passover Seder, but it had to be more than that to me. So I started exploring what the Jewish community had to offer, and at the time, it was the beginning of Jewish renewal in Boston, and that meant Havurat Shalom. So I started writing for the Boston Phoenix, and one of the stories I was writing was about Jewish renewal in Boston. I interviewed a lot of people including Rabbi Lawrence Kushner who became our rabbi, oversaw my husband's conversion, our wedding and much of our life for as long as he was at Congregation Beth-El, very formative person in my life. Since then I've written five books about contemporary Jewish practice, and all of those books were the books I wished I'd had when I was going through those parts of my life.

So when we were getting ready for our wedding, I asked Rabbi Kushner what I should read, and he pointed at me and said, "You should write a book about Jewish weddings 'cause the books are awful." I looked at the books and they were either written by an Orthodox Rabbi and it did not speak to me as a feminist or to my husband as a Jew by choice or to his mother, who was a Christian who was very excited about our wedding and his Judaism. Then the other books were all etiquette books. So I wrote *The New Jewish Wedding* the year after my wedding, and I wrote the *Jewish Baby Book* the year after I had a baby and so on. I wrote a book about *Living a Jewish Life, Choosing a Jewish Life*, which was inspired by Jim's conversion and also by my participation in the outreach committee at my congregation, and saying Kaddish after my dad died and so on and so forth.

Rabbi Hirsch: Before we go on from the life cycle books that you were mentioning, one of the books that I wanted to ask you about is *The New Jewish Wedding*. When I was serving as a congregational rabbi, and even now if couples come to me and I'm going to work with them or counsel them or help them prepare and officiate

their wedding, the number one thing after our first meeting if we're going to work together, I say is, "Go home, give me your address and I'm going to send you a copy of *The New Jewish Wedding* to read, and then when you come back-

Anita: Which is now *The Jewish Wedding Now*. After decades, we renamed it so it's no longer new like that, but it's *The Jewish Wedding Now*.

Rabbi Hirsch: *The Jewish Wedding Now*, yes. So originally I was sending them to *The New Jewish Wedding*, now I'm sending them to *The Jewish Wedding Now*. I pull you up wherever books are sold and send it right to the couple that I'm working with because it's always resonated with me, and it's always resonated with the couples that I'm working with. They come in with a variety of Jewish experiences and I've always found it to be an equalizer, a level playing field so that everyone comes in with the same comfort level without making assumptions, and then we use it as the jumping off point. I'm wondering how feminism and egalitarianism was a driver for you in writing that book, or if it shows up for you in the way that you created the book, because I feel perfectly comfortable giving it to all of the couples that I work with, and that's generally the reason why they're coming and reaching out and connecting with me.

Anita: I am a feminist. I've been a feminist since I understood what that meant, and a Jewish feminist, since I put those two things together in my own life. I want to say that I've updated the wedding book at least twice because things have changed in the community, and in the most recent iteration, pronouns have changed. I'm more inclusive and also acknowledge that Hebrew Jewish sources are about brides and grooms, and I tend to talk about beloveds, so I use both, but beloveds rather than, or couples. So as times changed, I changed. It changed. I couldn't write anything but a book that was steeped in respect for Jewish tradition and honoring the wisdom of contemporary Jewish life, which includes the radical transformation that feminism has added to our understanding of our tradition. So there's no compartmentalization. It's what I bring to everything I write.

I'm trying to communicate exactly as you said, to give people a level playing field and also to their families, especially if one of the families doesn't have a Jewish background, isn't Jewish at all, that it would be comfortable to their family to read that as well and to Jewish families who have little or no connection or have very specific ideas about what a Jewish wedding should look like. In my head it was like, "Well, no. She said we could do that. Here, it's in the book. The rabbi told us to read the book, and so the book says we could use grandma's shawl or grandma's mantilla for the huppah and wouldn't that be lovely?" That empowers, I think, couples to make Jewish choices. Really, all the Jewish books are to encourage people to make their own Jewish choices that are authentic to them and authentically connect to tradition.

Rabbi Hirsch: Yeah, once they have that level of knowledge and comfort that it empowers them to make those choices.

- Anita: Exactly. I have enormous respect for the reader. Anybody who picks up any of these books is interested. I don't assume they have any Jewish background, which is why everything is translated and transliterated, but that doesn't mean they're dumb. That means they just don't have this piece of information. But if you're motivated enough to be reading this, I have respect for that, and I want to be helpful. That's my service. These books are a service.
- Rabbi Hirsch: Right, and helping people make meaning of it so that they can understand what they're coming into for those significant moments. That's amazing. We started out talking just now about your life cycle books, and you have written such a wide variety of books, not fewer than anyone that I've ever met has said to me, "*The Red Tent* changed my life when I read it." I'm sure you're honored and have heard that before. But you have your novels and the life cycle books and then also your most recent project, *Period. End of Sentence* about menstrual justice. I'm just curious, how do you get your ideas for what you want to write next and how have you found it to write across genres and subjects?
- Anita: I feel like it's mostly serendipity. I don't pivot intentionally necessarily. I was a journalist before I wrote any of these books and my experience, and I didn't go to school for that, I learned that on the job pretty much how to interview and how to do research. When I did the wedding book, which was the first book, I think I was working with *Boston Phoenix*, which was an alternative news weekly in the Boston area. Thanks to my editors and just learning how I learned how to write that kind of a book. When I decided I wanted to try fiction, which it had never been a lifelong goal of mine, I remember talking to a couple of my colleagues and saying, "Your skills will translate. You can translate to writing fiction." I needed a challenge when I wrote *The Red Tent*, I didn't have a publisher. Nobody was waiting for it. They're sort of organic choices. It wasn't like one morning I woke up and said, "I want to write a novel." I woke up one morning and said, "I need to do something different," and I gave myself a deadline. I learned about Midrash from Larry Kushner. It's a very freeing tradition we have, being that playful and radical and challenging of sacred texts. I thought I would write a book about Rachel and Leah, and it changed 'cause I didn't figure out what the story was there. So the Dinah story gave me the plot, and so I wrote it and it finally found a home with a wonderful editor and wonderful publishing company. You never know what's going to happen when you publish a book. This is the great shock and wonder and blessing of my life that it was so successful.
- Rabbi Hirsch: I love what you said about Midrash because whenever I teach Midrash, the more classical collections, the historic sources, those give us the baseline for that play and that creativity and looking in the gaps in the stories and trying to understand what's missing, what might have been happening and to really have that imaginative sense of things. At the same time, I always like to emphasize that the clearly majority male-identified rabbis who wrote the classical Midrash, they don't get to have the monopoly on playing with our text and coming up with stories. It's just who was writing and who was writing things down at that time.

The tradition of Midrash and interpretation doesn't have to stop, which is I think a powerful expression of what you were able to achieve and bring to the world with *The Red Tent*. On this podcast, since it's named after a line from Esther, "who knows, maybe just for this moment you find yourself in a position of leadership," we also are playing with the character of Esther and interpreting and thinking about how she shows up as women in leadership and thinking about the ways that she inspires who and how women in leadership show up in the world. So I'm curious, have you ever had just for this moment, an Esther moment where you felt like you were in the right place at the right time and able to show up for leadership and read yourself into the story a little bit?

Anita:

I'm not an organizational person. I don't like committees, and I never sat on a committee when I was an active Temple member. When I was writing *Choosing a Jewish Life*, which is about conversion, I went to the mikvehs around town with various liberal rabbis to see their process, to see how they led people through this ritual of immersion. My husband converted, and so many, many years ago, we had an experience with Rabbi Kushner at the very funky small orthodox mikveh here in the Boston area. It was a very powerful experience, conversion and mikveh in particular, very powerful non-verbal elemental experiences of transformation. He was flying high after that for two weeks and would tell anybody this story of this amazing experience he had. Then when I got to the point, which was several years later to write this book, I went back to that mikveh and also a couple of other ones in the area and interviewed rabbis and felt that that mikveh did not serve the whole Jewish community at all.

It was very unwelcoming. It had very limited hours. To me, it was very much a matter of access and justice in the community, that everybody in the Jewish community should be able to use a mikveh authentically, not pretending. I knew people who dressed differently, women who dressed differently when they went there 'cause they didn't want to show up in overalls because they felt that they wouldn't be treated well. I actually went to the mikveh before I got married, but because of the wedding book, 'cause I wanted the experience I thought I needed to... I felt like an anthropologist. I did not have a transformative emotional experience. I felt like I wasn't welcome and it wasn't for me, but I needed this experience. After *The Red Tent* became a phenomenon and I started talking to people, this happened around the same time, I started talking to people about how we needed a mikveh, and I tried to find somebody to lead it.

So I talked to every rabbi I knew and I asked them. I was very obnoxious and nobody wanted to do it. Finally, the gentleman who was the head of the local federation said to me, "You have to do it," because I had a visibility, and certainly the Jewish women in the large Jewish community were happy to talk to me or listened to me. I gathered a very tiny five-member board of directors, including Paula Brody, who was the head of Outreach here in the Northeast, the Outreach coordinator for the Conservative Movement, my dear friend at Reconstructionist Rabbi Barbara Penzner and Roz Garber, who was at the time

the president of Hadassah locally so that we were the first board to brainstorm about mikveh.

I found myself the leader of the movement to open a truly open and welcoming mikveh here in the greater Boston area. We had to explain what a mikveh was, why we all needed a mikveh, not just for us personally, and how powerful this ritual was and how if we took ourselves seriously as liberal Jews as we were doing in so many other ways, this was one of them. This was an institution we could recreate. We could make a Midrash, a living one, and it happened. It was the right time, it was the right place. Boston's, as you know, a very creative Jewish community. Again, we had this powerhouse visionary executive director and really passionate advocates, people who joined the board, and it happened. It happened because it was a communal effort.

Rabbi Hirsch: I'd love to talk about your most current book and project, and I know that there's also an advocacy, potentially action element around that as well too and something that with Women of Reform Judaism and then the broader circles of people connecting with the podcast, we want to make sure to highlight for them.

Anita: This is the book, *Period. End of sentence*. So how did I come to write this? There's a film called *Period. End of Sentence*, and it won an Academy Award for Best Short Documentary in 2019. I was watching the Oscars and they announced *Period. End of Sentence*, and these young women go rushing up. They're really young women, including high school students. The director said, "I can't believe a movie about periods just won an Academy Award." Half of the women in the audience stood up and applauded, and I jumped off the couch. I thought it was fabulous, and I watched the movie the next day. It's like a 20-minute documentary. It's on YouTube. It's available to anybody who wants to watch it. I was very impressed with it. I had written a couple of columns, pieces about menstrual injustice.

There had been stories on the front page of *The New York Times* about women in Nepal who were sent out from their homes during their cycles because there's this belief that somebody in the house will sicken and perhaps even die if they're under the same roof as menstruating women. These women are sent out basically on their own to survive for a few days without shelter, without a place to go to, and there were deaths. There was also a story about a young woman here in Brookline where I live now, who wrote a piece for her high school newspaper about why weren't there period products in the bathroom. A young Jewish woman, by the way. So all of these things were swirling around in my head. Then I got a phone call from the president of the PAD Project, which made this happen in California.

They were looking for someone to write a book to accompany it, and they asked if I was interested, and I said yes. I learned a lot about the meaning of menstrual injustice and how pervasive... it's an expression of misogyny that is baked into most of the cultures on the planet. Having an unexpected period can be an issue

and a problem for some people, but for other people it's a catastrophe. If you think about women in refugee camps who get their period, what do they do? There's no bathroom, there's no safe bathroom, much less period products. If your mom has to make a decision between paying for food or period products and you have to go to school, what are you going to do?

What it means is a lot of menstruating girls skip class or skip school for the day, or don't try out for the track team, because what happens if they don't have a product and they bleed through. Bleeding through when you're 14 or 15 and having somebody see that is also a catastrophe. It shouldn't be. It's an accident. It's not a catastrophe, but it is a catastrophe in a misogynist world where menstruation and bleeding are considered not just impure, but disgusting. But this is a societal problem. Period products should be in every bathroom the way toilet paper is in every bathroom. And that sounds like a small change, but it's a profound change that acknowledges the humanity of people who have periods of people with bodies that bleed. That's a big shift, and we're nowhere near the end of this project.

Rabbi Hirsch:

I love the through-line that you drew to Midrash, and the idea of recreating something that's been an ancient tradition. I've been in Israel to archaeological digs where you can see mikva'ot identified by those seven steps down in archaeological sites. So this is really one of our oldest embodied physical rituals and practices and traditions that not only with your leadership and knowing that you were the one to do it, and then bringing the right people around you, you had the opportunity to recreate it for our generation for current times, and then also to bring the traditions to something that would be meaningful for people in this moment.

I've had the opportunity to both personally immerse at Mayyim Hayyim and to oversee, to sit on a *beit din*, for conversions, to be with people in other lifecycle moments, more creative and newer rituals for transitions and those times of change in life. Mayyim Hayyim was the first, but now there's a whole movement also around this recreating, not just the institution and the ritual and the idea of mikveh, but also creating more of these open and inclusive and feminist and creative and also beautiful, and a place that you would want to be mikveh that are around the country.

Anita:

The open mikveh movement is thriving, and I don't have the numbers in front of me, but we have the network that works together. We train mikveh guides online all over the place. We are in more than six countries, and there are new members in this movement all the time. I remember we had the experience of people flying in, sometimes even overseas, to use Mayyim Hayyim 'cause it was the only place they felt comfortable, a gay couple bringing their adopted child to be converted to Judaism. We were so touched by that, but also, and I'm talking about Aliza and me and the rest of the people on the whole team mostly volunteer, that nobody should have to get on an airplane to have this experience. That's a shanda. It shouldn't be like that. The expense and the time. There are times when one wants a mikveh that are not celebratory, that are in

fact transitions, people being ill, losses, facing death, the loss of a much-wanted child, a miscarriage, needing to heal after all kinds of experiences.

Mikveh is, in a way, as you use the word embodied, we are such a heady verbal tradition. This is a tradition where you don't have to know. You don't have to speak. There are blessings that you can say at Mayyim Hayyim. You don't have to say anything. You don't have to have a witness. It's available to you, but it can just be a place for you to confront whatever is going on in your life in the most vulnerable way naked in water, where modesty and the integrity of the experience are fiercely guarded. I think we're the first mikveh to be built by women. It's run by women. It's for the whole community. That's been a challenge too, making people understand that this is for everybody, people of all gender identities, people going through transitions of all kinds find a place in Jewish life, an embodied Jewish life at the mikveh.

Rabbi Hirsch: You were speaking about the woman-led nature of Mayyim Hayyim as a project, also striking that balance of emphasizing that it's not just women leading for women, it's women leading and bringing something new and creative and accessible to the world that's really for everyone. One of the other ways that I've been reflecting with folks about the story of Esther is she reaches this really high level of leadership, basically pushes up against the bounds of what both a woman and a Jew would be able to achieve in the society that she's living in at the time. I'm wondering if in your life, in your career, either with the mikveh or writing or anywhere else in Jewish communal life you've found that you've pushed up against some of those barriers or found any roadblocks for women in leadership or as a woman in leadership yourself?

Anita: First of all, I think the Boston Jewish communities is an interesting place. It's not too big. It's not New York. There is a tradition of people talking to each other across denominational lines, women in leadership. I feel like I've lived through the transitions, watched institutions be run by women, taking over from men without anybody saying anything about it. It's like, "Oh, look, we have a woman head of Hebrew College here." Nobody said, "Oh look, a woman rabbi." Within the last 20 years, there's been this shift into the liberal community, certainly, and actually parts of the more traditional communities as well that women are human beings, and fully human beings with all of the talents and abilities and foibles and weaknesses of any human being.

Rabbi Hirsch: Do you have favorite mikveh story or moment from the mikveh?

Anita: One of the most dramatic ones and contemporary ones was there was a cantor, it was a man in a conservative congregation who was in the reserves, the military reserves. He was called up to go to, I think it was Iraq. So when he came to the mikveh to mark the beginning of his service, his period of service, and he came in street clothes and he immersed and he left wearing his uniform. When he returned after his service, he came wearing his uniform, and he left wearing street clothes. To me, it just means, boy, you understand how to make a really



powerful life transition into a moment of Jewish reflection, that being Jewish is part of all of your life.

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, 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.