

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 Rabbi Jennie Rosenn.

What does it mean to have enough? What does it mean to be enough? These are some of the important questions that we ask at this time of year, as around the world, families gather at their Seder table to begin a week-long celebration of Passover. Of course, the Passover Seder is known for its questions. Why is this night different from all other nights? To those famous four questions I want to add a few more. My questions about having enough, being enough, these are rooted in one of the well-known songs of the Seder, Dayenu. It's usually sung with an upbeat melody when people are not yet too hungry for the main meal to focus. And this song recites a litany of blessings and miracles bestowed upon the Jewish people. If we had only been liberated from Egypt and had not been given the Torah, Dayenu, it would have been enough.

And so Passover has almost naturally become a time when we reflect on the blessings that we have. And aspirationally, we strive to make sure that everyone in our closer and wider circles has everything that they need too. We hold up a piece of matzah, the flat unleavened symbol of a speedy exodus from Egypt, and we declare, "This is the bread of our affliction. May all who are hungry come and eat." We leave a seat at our table for Elijah, the prophet. He's said to arrive when the Messiah is on the way, or perhaps the Messianic utopian age when everyone will have what they need. We feel especially close to that moment during our Seder. And sometimes that hypothetical seat for Elijah is filled by a very real guest or two, someone without a place for Seder, so that they too may have enough, enough food, enough shelter, and the embrace of a community.

My guest this week, Rabbi Jennie Rosenn, she thinks deeply about the concept of Dayenu. That's in part because she's the founder of an organization by the same name, Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action. Today, a Jewish holiday and global cause are intertwined as we celebrate the beginning of Passover and many people also observe Earth Day.

For me, Jewish values have always inspired my commitment to caring for and protecting our world. It's also going to take moral leadership, and bold, brave action to make a difference to save our planet for future generations. One of my all-time favorite Jewish texts is both an environmental story and a leadership parable.

Once upon a time, a man named Honi was walking down the road when he came upon a person planting a carob tree. Honi asked, "Since the carob doesn't

bear fruit for 70 years, are you so sure you'll live long enough to eat from it?". The other replied, "When I was born, I found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, so too shall I plant for my descendants."

Rabbi Rosenn and I speak about her work founding and leading Dayenu, the Jewish journey that brought her to this moment, and our shared commitment to taking action for our earth. Leadership, environmental stewardship, and Jewish ethics are united in this moment. And while we may leave this day, this intersection of our ancient exodus from Egypt and our modern moment of Earth Day, we may leave it with more questions than answers, asking good agitational questions is always the place to start. I began our conversation by asking a question of my own, for Rabbi Rosenn to introduce herself and share a little about her work.

Rabbi Rosenn: I am based here in New York City, although I'm originally from Boston. I definitely think of myself as a Bostonian even though I've been in New York since the early '80s. And I am the founder and CEO of Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action.

Rabbi Hirsch: Our show's theme is based on a verse from the story of Esther. She's become queen, she is Jewish, but she's been hiding her identity. And then Mordechai comes to her and says, "Now is the moment with Haman, boo, plotting against the Jewish people, that you need to go and reveal your identity." And we get this concept that I've been sharing that gives the name for the podcast of a just for this moment when you're in just that right place. And I'd love to know what's that just for this moment for you?

Rabbi Rosenn: I actually think that starting Dayenu is that moment for me. I joke, though it's not really a joke, that I was not looking to launch a startup in my early 50s, let alone at the beginning of a pandemic. Startups are not for the faint of heart, but my rabbinate has really been about mobilizing the American Jewish community to respond, and to be engaged with issues of social, economic, and racial justice.

And I started as a Hillel Rabbi, at Columbia Barnard, engaging young people in service and activism, and also serving as a general Hillel Rabbi. And then I worked for almost a decade at the Nathan Cummings Foundation. And a lot of that work was really building the field of Jewish social justice. And then at HIAS, helping to lead a communal response to the refugee crisis.

And I knew that launching a startup is risky and takes thick skin, which I don't have. And I asked myself, am I up for this? And I actually thought, no, I'm not, and I still need to do this. We're living at a time, I really think when we all need to do uncomfortable things. This is the existential crisis upon which the future of humanity depends and we have no choice but to give it everything we've got. And for me, that really meant founding Dayenu and building a movement of Jews who are working together with other communities to confront the climate crisis.

Rabbi Hirsch: Could you tell us, especially as we're approaching Passover, where the name Dayenu came from and why you picked it?

Rabbi Rosenn: Yeah. So Dayenu, as you know, is the kind of joyous song that we sing at the Passover Seder. Usually we think of it as like if God had taken us out of Egypt by not given us the Torah, Dayenu, it would've been enough. And usually we think about it as it would've been enough. We go through the litany.

But Dayenu can also mean we've had enough. We've had enough climate devastation. We've had enough valuing fossil fuels over the lives of black, brown, and indigenous people, Dayenu. And there's also a double entendre because Dayenu can also mean we have enough. We have what we need to confront the climate crisis. And we really do. We have the people, we have the power, we have the policies, we have what we need so that everyone can have enough. That name Dayenu really reflects both the urgency and the possibility of this moment.

Rabbi Hirsch: I love that, urgency and possibility. And something I think that resonates for me about that sense of Dayenu is both that we have everything in our power and resources to be able to address this crisis. We just need the will and the organization, to be organized as a community that wants to do something about it. And also that we have everything that we could need, right? We're not living in a time where we need to be in an industrial revolution in order to expand. Certainly different parts of the world are at different phases of their development and different phases of needs, but we literally have everything that we could possibly want on a whole as a society, even if we need to figure out how to distribute it properly. So I love that sense of it as well too.

Was there a moment for you as you were thinking about bringing Dayenu together, something you read in the news or something that happened to you that was that light bulb moment for you, of we've had enough, I am fed up, that sense of Dayenu, and I have to do something right now?

Rabbi Rosenn: As I mentioned, I've been working, I guess now for 28 years mobilizing the American Jewish community around issues of social and economic justice. And to be honest, for me, that had meant issues like poverty, immigration, hunger, like people oriented issues.

And I really had my own awakening to the climate crisis and to the fact that it was coming faster and more furiously than I had fully realized. I remember reading reports about the climate crisis and just being terrified. And also thinking, where the hell have I been? People have been talking about this for years. And I started to really just keep coming back to the fact that without major change we're headed for climate collapse in my lifetime. And the future of my children, let alone my grandchildren is in peril. Will we have enough food to eat? Will they have water to drink and clean air to breathe? And at the time I was working at HIAS, hearing stories of refugees and witnessing their pain, and

imagining a billion refugees, which is the number that many scientists tell us, that the experts are predicting if we don't make a massive change.

So I think the last straw for me was a very personal experience of a weather event that in the scheme of things was actually pretty minor. It was a heat wave in San Francisco when I was visiting my father a number of years ago. And again, it was a minor event in the scheme of climate events, but it was unbearable. And the city, unaccustomed to heat, it completely shut down. And I remember thinking that it felt apocalyptic. It was my first glimpse at really a deep dread and a sense of what could be.

And at the same time I was coming to realize that the climate crisis at its core actually is an issue of social, economic, and racial justice. It's about people. It's about who's bearing the brunt of climate change already and who will be most severely impacted. So as I was integrating the reality of living in this moment of climate emergency, I was also having conversations with friends and colleagues about how the American Jewish community was not currently mobilized. It wasn't mobilizing all its people in power to confront the crisis. There wasn't an organized effort at the scale that's needed. It's the existential issue of our time. And the Jewish community for a variety of reasons was not fully showing up.

So that was the moment where I asked myself those hard questions about do I have thick skin? Am I up for it? And ultimately decided that this is the moment that this is needed. This was my Esther moment. And I founded Dayenu almost four years ago, really to build a movement of Jews across the generations who are working together with other communities to confront the climate crisis. We like to say with spiritual audacity and bold political action.

Rabbi Hirsch: Something that I've really admired about the way that you've set up and structured Dayenu is with that organizing and mobilizing model. So I wonder if you could just reflect a little bit on what it's been like to build a startup, to build an organization in that way, and maybe an exciting story from the field where you've seen that really coming to bear in the vision that you had.

Rabbi Rosenn: We really understand our work as mobilizing Jews, Jewish communities and Jewish institutions, to engage at a systematic level around the climate crisis, the major levers for change. And our grassroots organizing model, or Dayenu circles, these are small groups of people. It might be in a synagogue, or a Hillel, or some are even in neighborhoods, who come together to take action on climate. And we offer training, and resources, and strategic campaigns that grassroots groups can then plug into. And that means that at any time there are actions that people can take individually, but more importantly, there are actions that folks can take collectively.

Ultimately, we're going to address the climate crisis and make the kind of change that is needed by acting collectively and building collective power. Dayenu was one small part of a massive effort to pass the Inflation Reduction

Act, terribly named bill, Just Green Recovery, which became Build Back Better, which became the Inflation Reduction Act. It is historic legislation to invest in a clean energy future.

We organized around the high holidays, 16 actions across the country, where Dayenu circles and partners gathered on the doorsteps of senators' offices with shofarot for the Hear the Call campaign, really calling on our leaders to take bold action on climate. And that is, I think, a good snapshot of what it can look like to mobilize Jews in the Jewish community as part of a larger climate movement to call for the kind of moral leadership that we need in this moment.

Rabbi Hirsch:

So I'm a very dedicated and grateful student of leaders like Rabbi Everett Gendler, of Blessed Memory, and Ellen Bernstein who she recently passed as well, and their writings and teachings, and really setting out that Judaism, and the environment and Judaism, and the climate crisis have what to say to each other, that we can draw from our texts and our values, and that this is something that we can do in an integrated way with our full selves, and that there's a Jewish mandate to be doing this work. I wonder what stands out and resonates for you?

Rabbi Rosenn:

I often think about the Jewish values that call us to rise to this challenge. And Ellen and Everett are beautiful teachers around the classic values like *Shomrei Adamah*, protecting the earth, or *Ba'al Taschit*, the prohibition against wasting. But there are other values also that I often think of like *bacharta ba'chayim*, choosing life. Ultimately, this is about life, *tirdof Tzedek*, pursuing justice, *shomer ger v'yatom v'almana*, protecting the most vulnerable. And I would say at its most basic addressing the climate crisis is about the very concept of living *L'dor vador*, living generation to generation. Will the generations continue, and what kind of lives will people have?

But at its core, for me, I think what I keep coming back to even in the midst of all of those very resonant values is that this is about courageous action. And we have many stories in our tradition about taking courageous action in the face of devastating threat, in the face of fear.

And the story that is really at the core of our people's narrative is the journey out of *Mitzrayim*, out of Egypt, literally a narrow place, a place of oppression and genocide. When we were wandering in the desert, God reminds us that the path forward and our redemption is not in the heavens or beyond our reach, *lo ba'shamayim hi*, our redemption is in our hands. God tells us it's not too baffling for you or beyond your reach. It's not in the heavens or beyond the sea. No. The thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it.

So the future of the world is in our hands. It's in our hands as in it's on us. It's up to us. And it's in our hands. We have the capacity, we have the science, we have the resources, we have the people, and we have the power. We can close that gap, which you know from organizing between the world as it is and the world

as it should be, by reimagining and rebuilding a profoundly different future, one that's livable and sustainable for all people, for generations to come.

So I come back again and again, *lo ba'shamayim hi*, it's not beyond us. It's in our hands and in our hearts, and we can do it. That for me remains a touchstone in all of the work that we do together.

Rabbi Hirsch: That's my all-time favorite Torah portion, so I love that it's what speaks to you as well. And it's also it's not beyond the sea, and you can do it, and no one else is going to do it for us. No one is coming to rescue us. We're the ones who have to do that work. So I love that. Thank you.

Are there urgent priorities that you might want to highlight?

Rabbi Rosenn: We know the science. We read staggering predictions of sea level rise. We feel record high temperatures. We've witnessed floods, fires, hurricanes. Many of us have not only witnessed them but experienced them. And we know that without very significant changes, we're hurtling towards an unlivable and unsustainable future. Many people are already experiencing the painful impacts of the climate crisis, and that's important. This is not only in the future, it is also in the present.

And in many ways what needs to happen can seem really complicated, but it's actually very simple. We need to keep temperatures from rising beyond two degrees Celsius. And we need to reach net zero emissions well before 2050. And in order to do that, we really need to do two things. We need to keep fossil fuels in the ground and unburned. And we need to build and shift to a clean energy future. And we need to do that quickly and we need to do that at scale. And that means that we need to be thinking not just about our personal practices, but how we can really be part of making systemic change.

Rabbi Hirsch: What about from your family history? Is there something in past generations? You also spoke about the earth as something that's *l'dor va'dor*. What about the generations of your family? And what's brought you to be a leader in this moment?

Rabbi Rosenn: My family history and my family experience absolutely informs my work today. I was raised in a family where being Jewish was deeply connected to the work of making the world more just and whole. My parents though not professionally engaged in social change, were both very civically involved. My mom in local town politics, my dad in nuclear freeze movement. And we also had a family Tzedaka collective where we really experienced as kids the practice of giving Tzedaka, and also the practice of learning about social issues and what are the organizations doing the work. It was very much in the culture and fabric of my family, that connection between a just whole world and being Jewish, and the work that that takes.

Also, I was named for my great grandma Jen. Because I was named for her, I grew up hearing stories about her. And she was really the matriarch of my mom's family. She was a wise woman. She ran the family store kind of under where they lived. And she would wake up early as I've been told to bake Hungarian pastries. She was from Hungary. And people would stop by and seek her counsel. And even as a kid, I really strongly identified with her and I still draw inspiration from her.

Rabbi Hirsch:

A convener, somebody who brought people together. And I love the connection back to her through your shared names.

Women have come so far in so many areas of leadership, and authority, and access. I think about when Women of Reform Judaism was founded, and it was around the time of women's suffrage, so even the basics of voting. Here we are, two women leading Jewish communal organizations that work on a national scale. And that's still, in my opinion, few and far between. That's my reflection on it.

Are there other reflections that you have about potential roadblocks for women in leadership or a time maybe when gender has showed up for you as the leader of a national organization?

Rabbi Rosenn:

I didn't know any female rabbis growing up. And I think this speaks to the issue of role models and who we see in leadership. My own Rabbi, Larry Kushner, was a really prominent figure in my life growing up. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Reverend Martin Luther King were major models for me of mobilizing for social change from a place of faith.

And when I think about who influenced my becoming a Rabbi, honestly, those are the first three people who come to mind. Those are consciously who my rabbinic role models were. But I've wanted to be a Rabbi since I was 14. And when I look back on when that realization or calling became clear to me, it was actually shortly after my family returned from a trip to California to visit my mom's best friend from college, Reverend Ann Windsor. She was an Episcopalian priest. She has passed away.

On that trip to California I saw her administer midnight mass. I can still vividly picture her standing on the dais in her robe. And I can't help but think that she actually was a major influence in my becoming a Rabbi. And I think this all speaks to one of the barriers, which is who we see in these roles. I think that the barriers I faced as a female Rabbi or leader have mostly been subtle ones, being mansplained, spending way too much energy dealing with sexual harassment, like the power of the old boys network. I think they're also internal ones, being socialized to want to be liked. Being a woman is so central to my identity as a leader, and I lead both pastorally and prophetically, like both of those dimensions of being a Rabbi, the pastoral and the prophetic, both feel so deeply rooted in my being a woman.

Rabbi Hirsch: I love what you said about it being both prophetic and pastoral for you, to have your identity as both a woman and a Rabbi so deeply connected. That's very powerful.

Does the current situation in the Middle East, the Israel-Gaza war impact your work? And how are you balancing what I'm sure is a breadth of perspectives that's within Dayenu and the work that you're doing?

Rabbi Rosenn: We know that 80% of American Jews are concerned about the climate crisis. That's actually a statistic from five years ago, and I would imagine it's even higher. And Dayenu really works with that full 80%. And that's a wide spectrum. That's from the Boomer in the pew who's like a lifelong Zionist to a young JVP activist. And we're really building a multi-generational climate movement that's core to our work from the beginning. And that means that people are taking climate action with Dayenu who have a variety of perspectives on Israel and Palestine and the current war. And we have found that people are actually coming together across differences to take action on climate and appreciate the space to be together and focus on this shared concern as Jews.

I'll also say that Dayenu sits at the intersection of the climate movement and the Jewish community, and that can be a hard place to be in this moment of polarization. But I also think it's a critically important place and that it has been really important for us to really work to stay in relationship with all of our partners, our Jewish partners, our faith partners, and our climate movement partners in this time.

Rabbi Hirsch: I think that's a really important aspect of this current moment to be emphasizing because I've experienced it with some of our feminist partners around some of the women's rights and advocacy issues that we work on, that roadblocks or barriers can be put up around not seeing eye to eye about the specific moment about what's going on in the Middle East. And it's encouraging to hear you say that actually that's an important piece of your work to keep those doorways open even if it might be more challenging.

Could you tell us about something that you're working on through Dayenu or otherwise that you're excited about that's coming up?

Rabbi Rosenn: Yeah, so I think the most important thing for climate is going to be the election. And Dayenu mobilized in 2020 and 2022 our chutzpah campaign to elect leaders who have the chutzpah to take bold action on climate. And we are gearing up for the biggest chutzpah campaign yet, chutzpah 2024, working with the environmental voter project.

And we together with them identify what they call climate concerned, low propensity voters, which are folks who care about climate but don't always vote. And many of those are also, some of those are Jews, some of those are not Jews. So we are gearing up already, starting to lay the groundwork for the

campaign that will be mobilizing thousands of Jews across the country to help get out the climate vote.

Rabbi Hirsch: That's amazing. And I think that focus, that ability to draw people out through a different reason is something that is always an effective strategy to get people out the door, and it's something where you're going to draw on their values. So that's exciting to hear about.

Rabbi Rosenn: Yeah, and we know that climate is a top issue for Jewish voters. It's actually the number one issue for Jewish voters under 40. And I think it's also important for our leaders to know that this is something that the Jewish community cares deeply about.

Rabbi Hirsch: Right? It goes both ways. That's amazing that it's the number one issue for Jewish voters under 40 because that also says if Jewish communities aren't paying attention to that issue, then they're not speaking into the lives of that generation and those communities.

Rabbi Rosenn: Exactly. And yet, Dayenu came into existence because most Jews were not taking meaningful action. And I think there are two reasons for this. I think one, people aren't sure what they can do to make a difference in the face of such an overwhelming and complex crisis. And second, I think it's difficult to face what's at stake on an emotional, spiritual, psychological level. The fact that without massive change, we're hurtling towards a world that might be uninhabitable, where our children or grandchildren might not have clean air to breathe or water to drink, that many major cities may be underwater. It's like too much to take in. And so we disassociate, I think we turn away, we distract ourselves. It's like how can our souls and psyches bear such a painful possibility?

And so Dayenu comes to really respond to both of these reasons for inaction, to give people meaningful ways to take action on a systemic level, and also to support Jews and Jewish communities to live in this time with spiritual integrity. How do we build a spiritually rooted Jewish climate movement? Because the climate crisis, it's not just a political, ecological and social justice issue, it's also an issue of the soul. And so Dayenu has been really creating a whole set of resources to support Jews and Jewish communities in this moment. And that looks a lot of different ways.

We've created and run workshops across the country for Jews and Jewish communities to grapple with those feelings. For some people it's anxiety or fear. For some younger people, it's anger, it can be grief. And to cultivate a sense of active hope and move into courageous action and do all of this grounded in Jewish teaching, and tradition, and music. We need it to sustain us in this work. We need to root ourselves in Jewish wisdom and community, and sustain us for the work for the long haul, because we will not solve all of these issues in our lifetime. God willing, we will be able to make significant change to enable our generation and future generations continue to grapple and to build a livable,

just, and sustainable world, but we need to be spiritually sustained in the process. And we need to also have sources of joy and community in the process. So we call this our spiritual adaptation work because in climate you talk about mitigation and adaptation, stopping the bad and building the good, I guess you could say. And this is really about spiritual adaptation.

Rabbi Hirsch: I'm a card-carrying optimist, maybe despite it all, despite best efforts of the world to try to prove that I should think or behave otherwise. And I wonder how you keep up optimism and hope to do this work.

Rabbi Rosenn: So Rebecca Solnit, who's a member of Dayenu's Advisory Board and one of my Rebbes writes beautifully about hope. She says, "Hope locates itself in the premises, but we don't know what will happen. And that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. It's the belief that what we do matters, even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact are not things we can know beforehand."

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, Liore and Micah. Jen King designed our logo and Eric Shimeloni wrote our theme music. Thanks for listening. We'll have more Just For This moments next time.