

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've stepped up just for this moment. Each week, I interview women who are influencing the world around them. Our guest this week is Daphne Lazar Price.

For the first part of her time as queen, Esther hides her Jewish identity. When she and her uncle Mordecai realized that she is the only one who can save their people from Haman's wicked plot, the burden to act is on Esther. Esther must act alone as she boldly approaches the king, uninvited, against royal custom and protocol. She continues solo in her mission through the banquets and parties she's schemed to throw for King Ahasuerus and the evil Haman, until the moment when she can uncover his wicked plot. "*Zeh halsh!* This is the man!" She declares. It's Esther versus Haman, Esther versus the world. It's a dramatic moment, one fit for retellings in Purim plays and spiels each year.

Today, we rarely act on our own. As our guest today reflects, working in broad, strong coalitions across lines of difference is the key to success. Daphne Lazar Price leads JOFA, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance. Previously, she worked at the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, the Reform movement's office in Washington, D.C., where I was fortunate to work early in my career as well. Now we both head up Jewish feminist organizations that are rooted in denominations, even as we work together and connect with people beyond these distinctions. Sometimes working in broad, diverse coalitions looks like Jewish feminist organizations working together on an issue or a campaign. Sometimes it means creating a coalition that spans denominations, as Daphne and I do whenever we work together. This kind of diverse coalition building, working powerfully together across lines of difference, it happens less often than it could. However, it does happen more often than some might think.

Sometimes, building a coalition or cohort looks like getting to take advantage of opportunities for leaders of different organizations to work together, to gather, to lift each other up. And we reflect on a recent leadership program that we both participated in, which gave us the opportunity to do just that. Looking to our Passover story, the holiday we just concluded, there are moments when solo leaders step up: Nachshon walking first into the sea, a reluctant Moses leading the way. When we reach our freedom from Egypt, Miriam is the leader of the women singing joyfully, but she does not sing alone. Miriam picks up her timbrel, and all the women join her in song and grateful praise. We began our conversation with me asking Daphne to tell us a little bit more about how JOFA came to be, and her involvement in the organization since its earliest days.

Daphne:

The organization was first conceived around a dining room table. A group of women would meet regularly at a woman named Blu Greenberg's house. She is

kind of the mother of modern Orthodoxy. They named that there was a gap, we all knew, but they named the gap in Orthodox women's experiences in ritual and leadership and autonomy, specifically related to divorce cases, and they decided that they needed to put together a conference. And so from the conference came the organization. There were a few hundred people registered for the conference on the Thursday before, and on the Sunday, over a thousand people showed up, which was amazing.

And for me, I attended that first conference. It was kind of a gelling together of so many pieces of not just my identity, but my lived experience as an Orthodox woman. That means that I keep Shabbat, I keep kosher, and my participation in ritual life is through Orthodox synagogues, which is a very gendered experience, whether you're male or female, both in terms of how you're sitting, which side of the mechitza, but also the actual roles that you can play. And in some spaces, whether a woman's voice can even be heard altogether.

And so to have all of these people coming together to think out loud about so many of these questions that impact Orthodox women and Orthodox communities writ large was something that just... I felt like I was finally home, or I felt that I found a new spiritual home. And all of those pieces have stayed with me. To say that I am an Orthodox feminist, for some people might feel oxymoronic, but for me it was how I could live my full self as an Orthodox woman in Orthodox spaces and in all spaces. It also gave me the confidence to be who I am proudly in non-Orthodox spaces as well.

And so in the time that I've been leading the organization, I always stayed connected to the organization over the decades, in the years that I've been leading it, I have been able to focus on ritual inclusion and expanded roles for women. Also increased women's leadership in synagogue spaces and Jewish spaces across the board. And then also more recently, related to reproductive justice and now the war in Israel. So, these are all places where we can all show up with our fullest selves without having to minimize any piece of our identity.

Rabbi Hirsch:

I want to take a step back, and you shared both that this is an organization, JOFA, that you're proud to lead, and also one that really represents a full expression of your identity. Could you tell us a little bit about your Jewish path, your family history, and how that influences how you show up in the world today?

Daphne:

I grew up in Toronto. My parents are secular Israelis. My mother passed away in 2010. But my earliest childhood memories were of being raised in an Israeli home, less so than a Jewish home, whatever that means. Everything was Hebrew, the foods were all Israeli, everything just screamed Israeli. And then at some point when I was around eight or nine, my parents decided that they needed to formalize their Jewishness, I guess. They always sent us to Jewish school, and I think that they were conflicted by the fact that we learned certain things at school, but then we didn't do them at home. So, over time, my

parents, we would have Shabbat dinner where we would light candles, not necessarily when Shabbat officially started, but there would be Shabbat dinner with candles and a challah. Whether it came from a kosher bakery or not is a different story, but the symbols were there.

And then we moved onto a street where all of the other kids on the block were Orthodox Jews. And so over time, my brother and I would go to synagogue with them on Saturday morning. And again, there was this synagogue in the morning, and then going to the mall or the movies in the afternoon. And so they were all of those kinds of conflicting experiences. And so my parents decided that, I think also because of the block that we lived on, that they really felt like they needed to make our kitchen kosher so that all the kids on the block and our friends at school or whatever could eat at our house. The only shul at the time was Chabad that would do that, and so they very quickly, overnight, became Chabad, and that was our mostly synagogue experience. Also, the customs and some of the food restrictions and whatnot.

So, that was my upbringing. Also, I went to Chabad overnight camp, shout out to Camp Emunah, for three summers, and those were formative years, and those experience stayed with me. And also some of my closest friends today are still friends who I went to camp with from back then, which is, I think, everybody's camp experience, regardless of what camp you went to and where you ended up in life.

So, I went to university, which was not a common thing for Chabad girls or boys to do, where I became a Jewish studies major, which was even more uncommon. People went to go to law school, or to med school, or into architecture, or dentistry. So, to be an Orthodox woman in a Jewish studies environment, I think that there was some fear there. I finished my undergraduate degree, I did a master's degree in Montreal, and then I moved to New York, where I spent two years at Yeshiva University at Bernard Revel, the school of Jewish history.

And then I ended up in Washington, D.C., because I married my spouse, who was a born and bred Washingtonian. And then my career there, I knew that I wanted to stay working in the Jewish world. I didn't know what that was or who that would be with. And a long story short, I ended up taking a job on a lark at the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, where I thought that I would stay for a year. I had never actually known Reform Jews in real life. I studied them academically as a Jewish history major. And then I took this job, and I was kind of blown away, for a number of reasons, not least of which, again, that I'd never actually worked closely or known Reform Jews closely at all.

And I ended up, as I often joke, that I drank the Kool-Aid and had Stockholm Syndrome. So, one year turned into 17 years, and it certainly informed a lot of my life choices. Not religiously, necessarily, but certainly politically and socially, to understand the possibilities of pluralism or where the walls are. And it was an

incredible career. And also because I got to work with you there for a year when you were there as a legislative assistant.

Rabbi Hirsch: That's right, that's where we originally met. It's an amazing opportunity for those current legislative assistants to really be in on all of the different policy pieces. Are there any moments that stand out for you from that time?

Daphne: To say that every day was an adventure is an understatement. So, first of all, the environment, it was just very high energy, and there were always the things that we had planned to do that day or that week. But then there was always some crisis locally, nationally, internationally, that we had to drop everything and pivot and turn. Working with so many people for whom social justice was at the core of so many of their life choices was astounding to me, nothing that I had really ever experienced before or even since in that way.

If you want to talk about the fun moments that stand out, certainly the day that George Clooney came to the RAC for the pre-staging conversation before they were all arrested at the Sudanese embassy stands out. The fact that in the Obama years, that we had so many opportunities to be in the White House at the seat of power. And for me, getting to know and understand Reform Judaism, not just from a policy perspective, but also really how Jewish tradition drives policy choices, was really a fascinating mental exercise for me almost every day of the work of those 17 years.

Rabbi Hirsch: That's right, seeing how the Jewish values are the guide for the policy positions, for the advocacy, and all of that work.

Daphne: Yes, for sure. I would often get questions of, "Why does the Reform movement care about what's happening in Darfur?" For example, at the time. And one of the basic answers is *lo ta'amod al dam reiecha*, that we're literally watching blood being spilled, and what's our response to that? And especially in terms of policymaking decisions in Washington that impact countries around the world, that was a big deal.

Rabbi Hirsch: For me, I think it's always been such a core way that I've found my Jewish identity and my Jewish life blend seamlessly into the world. It's the lens through which I know that I view the world, you view the world, where the Jewish values are the ones that are shaping the way that we act, whether we're in synagogue or we're in the public square.

Daphne: Yeah, for sure. Look, from the perspective of where I grew up, everything was done through a *chesed* lens. So, acts of kindness, that didn't necessarily translate into policy, but certainly an awareness of what's happening right around you. So, whether that's tending to the sick, making sure that those who are hungry in your community have what they need to sustain themselves, supporting kids with different learning differences and being able to make sure that they get the tutoring support that they need in order to stay on par, those

were things that were part of my childhood daily experience, and certainly through my early adult years. And again, it wasn't until I came to the RAC that it opened up the possibility of applying these values to the world around me, both the non-Jewish world locally, but also, as I said, nationally and globally.

Rabbi Hirsch: So, Esther is the inspiration for our podcast, and the place that I want to go with Esther first, because it relates to what we've been speaking about, is around Jewish identity. We celebrate Purim all year round here on the Just For This, because Esther continues to inspire us, whether it's Adar or any other month of the year. But we're thinking about how Jewish identity shapes the way that you show up in the world, the way that I show up in the world; Esther has to hide her Jewish identity, and really suppress that for the beginning of the story, until the moment where she doesn't have a choice anymore. I'm wondering if there are times where you feel like you've had to hide your Jewish identity, or maybe suppress different parts of it, or be in your Jewish identity in different ways, depending on the circumstances?

Daphne: So, I will just say that as a general rule, I have never hid from who I am as an Orthodox woman, as a Jewish woman, as somebody who's committed to strengthening Jewish communities. I don't wear a kippah, so it's not one of those public signaling things that I can take off my kippah and put it in my pocket and all of a sudden I don't look like a Jewish person.

Honestly, the only time that I can think of where it became uncomfortable to talk about Jewishness was when you and I were recently together at the Civil Rights Museum in Greensboro. Let me just say that we were together with a bunch of Jewish professionals. It was executive directors and CEOs of Jewish organizations. And the docent at the museum asked us what brought us there, and we kind of backed into, "Oh, we're executive directors." And she's like, "Where are you from?" And we're like, "We're from all over the place." "But executive directors of what?" And we said, "Not-for-profits." And not one of us could bring ourselves to say the word "Jewish". Not out of shame, but there was just a discomfort in the moment.

Part of it, I think, was maybe being in the South. Part of it was when we talk about the history of the civil rights movement and Jewish involvement, and the concern of Jews centering themselves, which I don't think that Jews center themselves, I think that we were in it. Also by "we", I mean the people who were in it, not me, myself back in the '60s, I was not yet born. And possibly with the current situation in Israel, that maybe there's a question of discomfort around safety for the moment. Not that we were endangered, but there was nobody who was willing to say, "We are proud Jews, who proudly lead Jewish organizations." And I had never really experienced that before. That was something new for me.

Rabbi Hirsch: That's really interesting. It's a recent moment, we were both there together. I share a lot of the reflections that you have on it, and I do think that a lot of what

was going on was post-October 7th expression of, "Is it safe to loudly name who we are?"

Daphne: Yeah. And again, I didn't feel like if we said that we were Jewish professionals that something imminently bad was going to happen to us. I was worried that it was going to taint the rest of the experience in the museum.

Rabbi Hirsch: Yeah, that makes sense, for sure. You mentioned that program, the Leading Edge, the professional development program that we're in for newer CEOs and executive directors of Jewish organizations. And it's been really wonderful for me throughout my leadership journey, to get to participate in different cohorts, groups, experiences, where I'm in it together with people who are thinking, and learning, and having types of experiences where we can share together. I'm wondering if there's anything that you've drawn out in particular about the learning that we've done in that cohort so far?

Daphne: The answer is yes. So, first of all, I want to name that it is a gift to the Jewish communal world that Leading Edge runs this cohort experience called Leading Executives, that's open to CEOs or executive directors of Jewish organizations in the early years of their career. And I also want to name that it is another gift that our lay leadership, because I think that we need to have lay leadership sign off to say that, "We fully support this", that there's an understanding that even though we are in the senior most role in the organization, that there's an understanding that there's room for growth and improvements, and that it comes from a place of grace and generosity. So, I just want to name all of that.

And I also want to name that there are moments that being an executive director or CEO can be incredibly lonely as you manage the power dynamics between your lay leadership, who you may actually be really good friends with, and the staff, who you also may be really good friends with, but also sometimes it doesn't work out so nicely. And to have a space where you're with people who are at the same level as you professionally, and who may be navigating some of the same issues in terms of power dynamics and boundaries, and also how to make sure that everybody is using their time in the best way and really navigating all of that. And so to have other people who are filling similar roles, and to be able to share concerns, and also understand common ground, and also to learn with and from one another, has really been incredible, and I'm grateful for the opportunity.

Rabbi Hirsch: Yeah, that's such a beautiful reflection on that. For me, it was really that moment of coming into the room. We'd been meeting virtually with the cohort for a little bit, and coming into the physical room at this in-person retreat that we had in Greensboro, and looking around and seeing all of the people, and feeling the presence of, "These are all people who are... Maybe they work in completely different contexts for me, but they are doing things in some ways that are very similar." And to feel that sense of community and connection and support. And now that we're not in that physical same room together, to know

that that is a virtual network and a community that we have the opportunity to be a part of.

Daphne: Oh, 100%. The fact that there was this very intense in-person component that was over the course of a few days. Also, I have to say, in a very aesthetically pleasing setting. The campus was beautiful, we were lucky that we had good weather and could be outside, and it was really a great bonding experience to be in-person with people. We feel like the pandemic is behind us, but there's still moments where it's the first time that I'm seeing somebody in-person who either I've been friends with forever and just haven't seen them because of the pandemic. But also this started off, as you said, as a virtual gathering. And then where we got to know people a little bit, but then to be with each other in the same space, to really be proximate to one another, was really also a gift from Leading Executives, Leading Edge.

Rabbi Hirsch: Yeah, I think another piece of it for me was that it brought together people who might not necessarily always sit at the same tables or work together every day. And that's something that I was thinking about and wanted to ask you about, that we both lead organizations that are really rooted in our denominations, right? WRJ, Women of Reform Judaism, is the women's affiliate of the Reform denomination, the Reform movement, and you're deeply connected to Orthodoxy. But just thinking about work that we do together, and working across lines of difference and pluralism, and how that's been a factor in your work for you.

Daphne: From my days at the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, there were two things that I saw very clearly. Number one is that the more diverse the coalition, the better the odds are of you completing the task that you want: passing the bill, bringing people together around a table, whatever the end goal is, the more diverse the coalition, the better you are. What I also found then was that there were plenty of times that Reform leadership and Orthodox leadership were also at the table together, in ways that is often discouraged in more social settings, just because of difference of practice, and worries of assimilation. And Orthodox Jews, many times, other everybody else. "We're Orthodox and everybody else is however they practice, but our practice is much more little C conservative and inside baseballs." And in particular when there are issues around food, that if the food isn't kosher, that we're automatically left out.

So, I just want to say from a pluralism level, I actually think that if you really want to be a fully pluralistic organization or setting that you need to make sure that there's food that everybody can eat, and whether that's somebody who's vegan, or somebody who's gluten-free, or somebody who keeps kosher, if somebody is not eating, then you're not doing it right. So, I just want to say that that's been a thing that I've experienced, where it's just kind of been an afterthought. I want to say that that was not the experience at Leading Edge, Leading Edge really went out of their way to make sure that we were so well taken care of.

But again, back to the RAC, that was my lived experience for 17 years, that diversity in terms of the multitude of religious spaces and also secular spaces, but also internally in the Jewish community, that there were times that Orthodox leadership and Reform leadership sat at the same table. And that was really important for me to see and to experience. And then at JOFA, a lot of our work has to do with internal Orthodox politics, so synagogues and schools and Jewish communal institutions. But when it comes to supporting women in general, including Orthodox women, obviously, it's so great to see the number of times that we come together, whether it's planning a webinar, or sponsoring a rally, or sitting on the same dais with our counterparts from other parts of the religious and Jewish community, because we all have common ground issues that we sit with.

Rabbi Hirsch: Just last month, we co-sponsored a webinar that you invited us to join that was featuring Moran Zer Katzenstein from Bonot Alternativa. And we equally connect with her work, and want to know what's going on. So, I think that one of the best ways to work pluralistically is to always find these are the places where we can easily say yes. The more we say yes to each other, then when we have moments, or issues, or even, as you were mentioning, figuring out situations of food or how we can be together, then we are practiced in saying yes to each other. So, when it's more challenging, more complicated, just more aspects to figure out, we are comfortable, and want to figure out how to say yes, even in those more difficult moments because we've been saying yes in the easy moments.

Daphne: Oh, 100%. But also, even if there are moments that we can't say yes, for whatever reason, and that goes both ways, I can pick up the phone and call you and say, "Listen, you know how much I appreciate the work that you do," or vice versa. "And this is just something that we, in this moment, for whatever reason, we can't." Either we never will, or this moment is not the right time, or there's some other factor. But the fact that we are in relationship with each other, I think, is everything. And I don't know historically that that has happened in many spaces.

And I think also the fact that we're all women working to support women. We are a narrow field, and we can point all of the fingers to the Orthodox community for all of the ways that women don't always have full participation and access. I can also point to places both in the movement, but also in the world in general, where these are universal concerns, and how they play out maybe different community by community, but there's still a ways to go on equity and equality for women at large.

Rabbi Hirsch: That's right. And I think that if we are focusing on issues of women's empowerment, and gender equity, and inclusion, then it's more important to find the times where we can work together, because we're already fighting challenges of exclusion in other ways.



Daphne: For sure. I'll also throw in there reproductive justice, where the range of access and safety for women, depending on where they are geographically, I think that that is, in this country, I think that that is something that speaks to all of us who care about women and women accessing healthcare, regardless of where you sit on the denominational spectrum. I'm so glad that we've been able to raise our voices together in those spaces, as well.

Rabbi Hirsch: I'm really glad that you said that, not only because it is a crucial issue of our time, as we see, really, the attacks on women's bodies, the bodies of people who can become pregnant, continuing on in the headlines every day, but also because sometimes folks would like to say, "There's a denominational divide." Or people have different opinions, based on their observance level of Judaism. And for us, that's always been something that we can be really aligned on. And I'm proud whenever we can work on and stand up for issues of reproductive justice together.

So, I want to go back to Esther and ask you, as I've been asking all of our guests so far on our season, to put yourself into Esther's shoes, and think about if you've ever had a "just for this" moment? An Esther 4:14 moment, where, whoever that Mordecai was, or maybe the voice came from inside of you, you knew that you were in the right place to lead at the right time, and it was the moment for you to step up.

Daphne: So, I talked about being at the first JOFA conference, and I talked about walking into the RAC, and I want to talk about walking into JOFA as the executive director. As I said, I've had an amazing career, and so blessed to work with so many amazing people, and the bulk of my career really has been lifting men. For me, stepping into this role as executive director of JOFA is an opportunity to say, "I too am a leader." And also to be able to lift up the voices and experiences of so many other women who previously either didn't have a platform, or felt that they were unprepared, or, as is so often the case of women who experience imposter syndrome, felt that they were unworthy.

And so, till this day, I have conversations with women who are like, "I don't know if I should apply to do this thing. I have what to say, but I don't know if I'm really worthy to write this article. I had a question to ask, but then I thought, who am I to ask this question?" And so I spend so much of my time getting women to put away their self-doubt, to step into their full selves, to own their knowledge, to lean into their passion, and to really live their fullest selves.

I want to say that I was once at an event with Anat Hoffman. We were in Chicago for a reproductive rights program. Anat Hoffman was then the head of IRAC, the Israel Religious Action Center, and also was spearheading the efforts of Women of the Wall. And she took me aside, and she put her hands on my shoulders, and she said, "Daphne, I need to understand you Orthodox women. You know everything, you're organized in your own lives, you have passion for everything that you do. Where are you? Why haven't you taken control of

things?" And obviously it was a question that she didn't actually want to hear the answer to, but it was that she planted that seed that I was like, "Okay, I see. I actually see that I have some role to play in this."

And so when I think about the work that I do now, I think about that conversation that she and I had. And I also, I want to add that I was at a session at the GA a couple years ago, where they were also talking about the pipeline for the Jewish future. And in the Q&A, they said that there were three more questions left. And I was the fourth person. And when they got to me, they were like, "I'm really sorry." And I said, "It's okay, I don't have a question, I just want to say something."

And I stood up and I introduced myself. I said, "My name is Daphne Lazar Pryce, I'm the executive director of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, and I'm here to say that if you have a pipeline to fill, or a field to seed, you need to look to Orthodox women who," and I used Anat's words, "who have the knowledge, the passion, and who are really just waiting to be invited into spaces, or to find the opportunities where we can step in and lead, and to share our wisdom and strengths and leadership with the Jewish community."

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 moments next time.