

## Just For This: Season 1, Episode 10

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 Danya Ruttenberg.

Power and powerlessness. One way that we can view our sacred narrative and our modern world is through this paradigm. Just a few weeks out from Passover, our holidays celebrating our journey from slavery to redemption, we can certainly apply this lens. Once we were slaves, now we are free. From slavery to freedom. From powerlessness to power together as a people redeemed.

The Purim story, which continues to inspire our podcast, is also full of these power dynamics. Queen Vashti, Esther's predecessor, is both powerful and powerless.

Powerless. The king demands that she appear at a party and show off her body.

Powerful. She refuses the king's decree.

Powerless. She's kicked out of the palace and is no longer queen. Esther too lives within these power dynamics, although her path is a different one, almost the reverse.

Powerful. Esther reaches the highest echelon of ancient society for either a woman or a Jew, ascending to the position of queen.

Powerless. She must conceal her Jewish identity, and her scope and authority are relatively limited, even though she is a monarch. Mordecai, representing all of the Jews, they are powerless to stop Haman's wicked plot to kill them all. Esther feels powerless to save her people until the moment that inspires our podcast, when she steps up just for this time and knows that she must reveal her identity and ask to save her people.

Powerful. Esther appears unannounced before the king. My guest today, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, embodies and educates us all about power, power together, power with, power to change. She's an organizer, writer, and teacher. She speaks truth to power and moves the world toward justice with her actions and her words. In our powerful conversation, we focus on two important issues of our time, restorative justice for those harmed in Jewish communal spaces and abortion access. She leads in both of these areas and many more, and inspires those around her to act powerfully together. We began with me asking Danya to share her journey and her story.

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Rabbi Ruttenberg: I grew up as probably most American Jews did with a fairly strong culturally Jewish sense, and we went to services a couple of times a year, and I had a bat mitzvah, and we knew we were Jewish, and I didn't have much knowledge, and that was the beginning of the end of it. I decided I was an atheist not long after my bat mitzvah because I didn't think God was a dude in the sky with a lot of judgment to issue at everybody all the time, and a lightning bolt somehow accidentally fell into the religious studies department. When I was in college, I thought I was going to study philosophy and took a class on early Christianity and studied religion instead. When I was in college, my mom died and went to go say Kaddish because that's what you do.

The funeral's Jewish, and we sit Shiva because that's you're Jews, that's what you do. After reading all of these books on ritual theory and thinking about what ritual is and does, I was able to see what was happening in the siddur in a totally different way. At the same time, in grief, strange things were happening to me that were difficult to name and articulate, that I would later call mystical experiences because I was a philosophy nerd. I went looking for language to articulate that strange feeling of presence, luminescence, and feeling of the edges of myself blurring.

It took me... And it's like, over years, I started to figure out that... Oh, actually, thousands of years of thoughtful philosophy didn't all think that God was an angry dude on a mountain with a beard, but had more thoughtful language for this thing, and had met the thing that I was meeting at night in my walks aimlessly around in circles, and over the course of this process, I was graduating college, moved to San Francisco because it was the late nineties, and I could, and through all of this, I'm a kid who's into punk, and I was a feminist, and I came out as queer, and I'm an activist, and all this stuff is happening, and decided I didn't hate services enough that when I got to San Francisco, I should find a synagogue, I guess.

I should know which cafe is mine. I should know which hairdresser's mine. I guess I should find a shul. In the course of shul shopping, accidentally stumble into Rabbi Alan Lew's shul. *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared* is a classic that many people now appreciate. *Be Still and Get Going* is his other book of collected and adapted sermons, which *This Is Real* is also and is underappreciated. But I walked into his shul. The man's Torah is extraordinary, and I sat down, and the davening just felt right, and then he opened his mouth, and I just followed him around for five years. You know you find a teacher sometimes. I was like, "Okay, this guy." And to the great confusion of my younger self, I got hooked on Jewish life, Jewish practice, the ability of a person to connect with the big bigness through the system.

Rabbi Hirsch: How did that move into wanting to be a rabbi?

Rabbi Ruttenberg: Listen, I have long said that the still small voice deep inside us, our intuition, is the radio station of the divine. Rav Kook says this, it's not my great *hiddush*, my original thought, but it resonates for me. I was working as a freelance writer in

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San Francisco in the late nineties. I had a great set of friends. It was fabulous. It was queer. I got to get dressed in costume every other evening. My life was fantastic. Yet I kept craving this other thing, and the little voice of my intuition kept saying, "No, go do this other thing. You don't get to stay. You have everything you could want, but you need something else." And it was not easy. It was not fun to have to peel away from this thing that brought me so much comfort and joy. But I understood on some deeper level that I was being compelled to follow another path. For some people, entering the rabbinate really is a choice. For me, it felt like I was being haunted, like the telltale calling, I don't know.

Rabbi Hirsch: I've heard of people saying, feeling, or expressing it as, "I'm being called to the rabbinate." I've never heard of being haunted to the rabbinate. So I love that.

Rabbi Ruttenberg: That was something.

Rabbi Hirsch: Yeah, that's a good new step. I think a recent story that I have followed, and I know many in the Jewish world have followed, is the goings-on at Ziegler, the rabbinical school that you attended. I know that that's a time where you've stepped up bravely, which is something that we reflect on and celebrate a lot in this podcast. I wonder if you could tell us the experience of what it was like to be there and a little bit about what's going on now for those who might not have followed the story.

Rabbi Ruttenberg: When I went, I was a nerdy little student of Rabbi Lew's, and the Conservative movement was the right place for me, theologically and philosophically. Candidly, I called up a couple of queer elders in the movement and said, "Don't ask, don't tell, what do I do?" And was told, "Just go in, get the education that feels correct, get ordained, and move on with your life." And whether or not that was good advice is unclear, but it felt like I was supposed to go get the training that felt right for me as a rabbi. I assumed that there was room in this place for somebody like me, and I was just told again and again and again, in a million different ways, that I wasn't welcome. I didn't belong. It wasn't okay that I was there and I wasn't wanted, and if I wanted to leave, that would be great.

Rabbi Hirsch: That is so powerful and so painful, and I'm just sitting here thinking, as someone who has benefited from your teaching and your leadership, what if you had listened? What if you had listened any of those times when you had that repeated pattern of, "Go away." Or, "You don't belong here"? It's inconceivable to me, and you didn't listen.

Rabbi Ruttenberg: For me, and I have worked out my stuff about this, and the reason it was impactful to me is because how it was done managed to punch exactly at my own personal insecurities that I was holding as I was walking in. That place shed women. It wasn't only cisgender women who were impacted. Trans people, bunch of cis men, there's ableism. There's all sorts of stuff going on there. It wasn't just a gender issue. But that place shed women. I have friends who walked away believing for 20 years that they were stupid. I had friends who

walked away, that they dropped out. The thing is that a lot of the tactics worked.

They shed women because a lot of the messaging, "Go away." People were counseled out. I have a friend, who until all of the investigations started, believed for 20 years that she wasn't able to be a rabbi because she cried that one time in philosophy class. That's a genuinely brilliant human being, and the Jewish world has lost great leadership because she bruised somebody's ego somewhere along the way or something. She ruffled the wrong feathers. So my experience as a student was just trying to survive this and trying to think, "Am I going to drop out? Is there somewhere else I could go that would give me any kind of education that would feel correct to me, vis-à-vis my relationship with Judaism and God?"

Rabbi Hirsch: Yeah. I wonder if you could bring us up to the current moment. You've written a book that deals heavily with this subject, so I'm wondering if both from the more academic text-based frame of it, but then also through the power, the organizing of your own stories. You could tell us a frame through what happened.

Rabbi Ruttenberg: So this is a fascinating thing. I wrote this book that was published in 2002, all about the theory of Teshuvah, and all this time this thing had happened to me, and I wasn't honestly thinking consciously about it as I wrote my book because I thought about this as this thing that happened to me that I'm probably not going to be able to ever really talk about in public because its therapist fodder or fine. Then in January 2023, long before I was writing *On Repentance and Repair*, I've been active in work around addressing misconduct in the Jewish community. I've been doing this work for decades, and by this point I've been, there is a whisper network in our community. There's a lot of unpaid staff. Karen McGinnity brings me in. She says, "There's a case, I've been working with a student at Ziegler. Will you join a phone call to help strategize on how to support this student?"

I said, "Okay." I get to the Zoom call, Lauren Henderson, who is a friend of mine, Rabbi Lauren Henderson and who I used to know in Chicago, and we would hang out quite a bit, is there, I didn't realize she had gone to Ziegler. She was yet another one of the women who many of them drop out, some transfer. She had transferred to JTS. She had a story. We are listening to Shayna Dollinger, now public, talk about her very dramatic story of her Title IX rights being denied. Lauren and I are looking at each other going, oh my God, it's still happening. When you're in a traumatic situation, you're focused on getting through it yourself often, and you're just in survival mode.

Now she and I are out. We have a measure of comfort and power and are both in a place of more safety in our careers. We're like, "Okay, it's time to say enough. Nobody else should be hurt." So we said, "Okay, it's time to organize." And so we started reaching out to people and a Google Doc got formed with bullet points of a bunch of the stuff that had been done and the misgendering at

the screaming at this person and this thing that happened to this person...and we send it in right before last Pesach to the Va'ad HaKavod, the ethics committee of the Rabbinical Assembly, the Va'ad opened an investigation and things had happened in order to generate the opening of an investigation by AJU that led to them hiring Cozen O'Connor, which is a firm that does this work to do a proper investigation on the institutional side. So they have done an investigation.

We now, at this point, know of at least 40 former students who have been harmed. There are probably more, but that's how many have come to us. The investigation reopened after the story went public, and a bunch more people who had not been contacted because AJU did not do a good job. Publicizing had come out, and there were more federal violations to be counted. So now as this is being recorded, we're waiting for the Cozen O'Connor report to drop, may it be public and fully transparent with all the information, and we are at a midpoint in the Va'ad HaKavod investigation. As somebody who wrote a book on all of this, it has been fascinating to see theory play out on my body, including institutional betrayal, including I've been out in front because I can afford to be out in front. But that also means people have needed a place to dump their psychological stuff and their ire, so it has been at me. All of the case studies and all of the theory is happening on me.

Rabbi Hirsch: Yeah. Sometimes you live the experience of a book, and then you write it. In this case, it's a little bit in reverse that the theory is proving out. I think so many parts of this story are really painful, really hard, really compelling. What's standing out to me right now is, you reflected that you felt so singled out, so alone, and on your own in this abuse and this pain while you were going through the experience. Maybe there were people who supported you, who you talked about, but that it was solitary and then the incredible, and it sounds like maybe even holy experience of finding out that there were other people and that you could bring your stories together in order to have that kind of power.

Rabbi Ruttenberg: Even if one is able to identify a situation as somewhat problematic or somewhat not right, or it doesn't make you feel right, or, "Ah, can you believe what they said?" The amount that people feel disempowered when harm is happening, and the profound amount of, "But what could we do to ever change this? How could I ever go up against these people?" It's so deep. It's so real. Even as we were putting together the letter, the people who are terrified of retaliation, and justifiably, it's real, that's how power functions. So even if you get validation when the thing is happening, you have workers who say, "It's not okay that we don't get bathroom breaks." Or whatever. What can you do? The shift happens when you start to see what might happen if you come together and where the lever of change might be. Then suddenly, everything's different. Knowing that there is something and knowing that it's possible is everything.

Rabbi Hirsch: Absolutely. I want to stick with that idea of powerlessness and feeling powerful and shift to another area that we have worked on together, organizing around abortion access and reproductive rights. I'm wondering if you could just tell me

a little bit how you got into that work, what it means to you as a rabbi, as a leader to do that work, and also what's at stake right now. It's not like something that has gone quietly away. We're talking now at the end of April, and it's been a week where there are people in the street in Arizona hoping to repeal a law from the 1800s and a Supreme Court case that considers if women, if people could become pregnant, could lie waiting in emergency rooms until the point of death before they would be treated. So this is a serious, serious, very present moment for this issue, and I think it's really one that can be seen through that frame of power and powerlessness.

Rabbi Ruttenberg: State power ultimately wants to work on our bodies. Every power ultimately wants to work on our bodies. Religious patriarchy too. When you go down, there's always some element of bodily control. It is unsurprising that, at the end of the day, we're looking at a case of *pikuach nefesh*, life-saving. Are we going to let people die? Is the adult person's life worth enough to save them, or are we just going to let people die to say nothing of people's autonomy, access to medical abortion, and all of that? And right now, it feels so much like Christian nationalism is the steamroller that is just eating everything in its path.

Yet again, it's like, "Where are the doors? Where are the cracks? How can we organize?" And one of the things that I love about Rabbis for Repro, 2,500 rabbis and counting, coming together using their language of religion, using RFRA, using the religious freedom cases against abortion bans. Indiana, they used Mike Pence's Religious Freedom Restoration Act against him to rule against the abortion ban and rule for Jews and everybody else. We are potentially the crack. We are potentially the way out for everybody. God only knows what will happen when it gets to the Supreme Court. There are a lot of unknowns. I just got to keep on holding up hope.

Rabbi Hirsch: Right. It's the kind of issue where if you think about it on a person by person or even a place by place basis, it seems like one of those issues where we're going backwards and backwards and backwards, but where I preserve hope is those 2,500 rabbis who get together and say, not just once a year, but especially once a year, "This is what I'm preaching on from the bima, and this is what I'm teaching about this week." And it is the states where every time a reproductive rights, abortion access ballot initiative goes before a state, when you ask people if they want to have control over their own bodies and access to their own healthcare, then they say yes.

Ask them in the street or ask them based on their political affiliation, maybe you hear something different, but ask them if they want to control their own bodies and keep their own bodies sacred and safe, then they say, "Yes, I want that." So that's giving me the hope and the faith to keep going on the work as we're testing and seeing that play out in all of the places where we can put it on the ballot.

Rabbi Ruttenberg: Completely. People want abortion access, and we're bringing legal arguments that put cracks in the armor. We're educating on theocratic ways of reading.

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Even the idea, the concept that abortion bans are somehow biblically supported, rabbis just come in and they're like, "Well..."

Rabbi Hirsch: Actually, don't mess with us when we get into text. We know what's up. I have loved so far on this podcast getting to ask different people to reflect on their Esther 4:14 moment, a maybe just for this moment, you find yourself in a position of leadership. How does that text live for you? Is there a moment that comes to mind?

Rabbi Ruttenberg...: I don't think there's been one, one that comes to me yet, but definitely that moment when... Lauren Henderson and I looked at each other in the Zoom room and said, "This harm is still happening, and it should not be happening to anybody else. We have to keep it from happening to anybody else." So today, that's our job.

Rabbi Hirsch: I think that's very relevant to Esther because, also, something that fascinates me about her model and her experience is, she doesn't reveal her Jewishness and her identity right away. It's at a particular moment of crisis, but also what you're reflecting on, I think a moment of a bit more safety for her, where she has the security to know that she is insulated somewhat at that highest level of power, even though the choice that she makes to go before the king is very risky.

Rabbi Ruttenberg: I think we underestimate what happens when Esther's showing up in the middle of this place uninvited and the risk that she takes there. Not to compare myself to her in this moment, but really, she is out there. She's showing up and doing something truly chutzpah-tic there in a way that doesn't always get the appreciation that it deserves. We always think about her at the meals being strategic, but the shock of Esther showing up, and you could imagine everybody in court being like, "What's going to happen? Is the king going to chop off her head or what? I can't believe she did that. How dare she?" This is a different kind of leadership that she's also exhibiting. There's the stuff behind the scenes that nobody sees, but there's also this thing where she's showing up in public and taking a real risk.

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 at Just For This podcast. You can also follow Women of Reform Judaism at WRJ 1913. 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.