

Rabbi Hirsch: Who knows, maybe it is just for this moment that you find yourself in a position of leadership. I'm Rabbi 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 Elka Abrahamson.

How would you describe your Esther-ness? How are you like Queen Esther? For those along for the journey this season, Queen Esther has been our model for leadership. We've explored how she stepped up in a moment of crisis. Each guest has reflected on a Just For This moment, their Esther moment, or to use a word coined by my guest today, Rabbi Elka Abrahamson, each guest has reflected on their Esther-ness.

Rabbi Abrahamson, president of the Wexner Foundation, is a leader of leaders and not only because her work is to develop, support, shape, and build future generations of Jewish leaders. She is an astute observer of leadership trends in the Jewish world today, and we discuss some of the nuanced challenges faced by women leaders.

She draws on her personal experiences and the current moment we are living in to reflect and charge us all to act. Whether during her own journey to the rabbinate or earlier this fall with the decision to formally end the Wexner Foundation's financial and programmatic relationships with Harvard and the Harvard Kennedy School, Rabbi Abrahamson leads with decisiveness and poise.

Something our guest said about this current moment is sticking with me. "Women took up the women's issue in the war, and men are taking up the strategic issues in this war." As we continued to discuss, we agreed that many women are doing, acting, getting things done right now, and more men are reflecting, writing, speaking up, offering thought leadership, and executing strategy.

In many ways, that's why we started this podcast: to give my guests, women leaders in the Jewish world, an opportunity to reflect, to contribute to the thought leadership of our Jewish world today. In that light, I'll share a few of my own thoughts about this current moment.

We are seeing a period of tremendous upheaval, a period of pain and challenge. Israelis who lost family and friends on October 7 are struggling. The entire country is in some form of trauma. Every day, Gazans are facing hunger, war, and trauma of their own. In North America and beyond, antisemitism is rising to unprecedented levels. And we see this in our hometowns, on college campuses, and in the public square. And this is not a time of uniformity or unity in Jewish opinions from a religious practice to foreign policy.

It is so easy to retreat to our own camps, our own echo chambers, our circles of comfort and conformity. And yet, the newest studies emerging are finding that this is an unprecedented time of opportunity for rich Jewish life. And I agree. I am an eternal optimist and I'm also a realist, and there is still a way to see this difficult moment as an opportunity to as both a rupture and a new beginning.

People want to connect. They want to be in community. They want to express their Jewish identity. The question is, are we ready for them? That's where we need to tap into our own Esther-ness and step up for this moment, to prepare our communities, institutions, and congregations to welcome everyone who is seeking connection and meaning in this moment, to open our doors or build new ones if the ones that we have are locked for some right now.

So, the question before us as leaders is how are we going to say yes to as many of these people as possible? How can we welcome people in, even if it's outside of our comfort zone? Even if we don't agree on every practice or principle. This is a moment to welcome each other in. We have to get comfortable as Rabbi Abrahamson and I discussed, with maintaining our own identity and being open to being changed by those around us, that's what it means to lead and that's what it means to be in community.

We have an incredible opportunity right now to step up just for this moment. There are two choices before us: stay in the pit, the negativity, the end of the world mentality, or we can choose to look toward a better world and celebrate and welcome everyone who wants to be with us. That's my Esther-ness. And great leaders like Rabbi Abrahamson are leading the way. I began our conversation with her by asking her to tell us more about the work of the Wexner Foundation.

Rabbi Abrahamson: That foundation was early in the field of private philanthropy. We're a programmatic foundation rather than a granting foundation. So, our work is focused on investing in talented leaders, developing them first in active cohorts that are intentionally diverse, stretched across very wide expressions of Jewish life. And part of our training includes lifelong support, mentorship, guidance.

So, we have a network of about 3,000 alumni, Jewish professionals, volunteer leaders, and public service professionals in the state of Israel. And we have a total of about six, seven initiatives running at one time all based in a peer cohort learning through selected cohorts, even shorter as we believe in leadership and we develop leaders.

Rabbi Hirsch: I'm curious about two of those pieces, and I should say that I'm an alum of the graduate fellowship and was in a cohort in Class 23 while I was in rabbinical school studying at HUC-JIR, and really benefited from being a part of that experience. Two pieces that have always stood out to me. It was the cohort piece which you mentioned and the leadership piece. Were those always the focus by design from the start?

Rabbi Abrahamson: Well, leadership learning was always a focus and trying to determine what kind of leadership philosophies and faculty we should bring to developing leaders in the Jewish space and in Israel's public service. Our funder, Les Wexner, had a sense from his own personal experience as a lay leader that you don't get much training to do this work if you show up often enough, if your checks are large enough, if you lean in enough to the organization, you're probably going to be asked to assume a position or a title of leadership.

And when he was asked to assume some very big jobs in the volunteer Jewish space, he paused and said, "I don't know that you really want me to do this. I'm not trained as a leader; I'm trained as a retailer." He likes to say, I'm in the schmatta and I'm in the underwear business. And that's what first motivated him to seek out colleagues and mentors who could help him think this through.

He found two wonderful rabbis, Rabbi Moshe Corson and Rabbi Herb Friedman of blessed memory, who were partners in thinking through what it would look like to develop leaders. And they took a long time, a full year of just conversation with experts in the field of leadership to think about how to teach.

Once the programs were developing on the ground and selections were being made for who to put in a cohort, there was no sense of, "Oh, we need leaders from this movement or this kind of Judaism." It was just, "Let's bring everyone together." My own gloss on history is the impact of diverse leaders in one room, having to learn together, talk together, get along was a simmering secret sauce of our programs that we have now made intentionally a brand of Wexner.

And I think we learned very quickly how to do pluralism in a world where it was very rare. And my own experience as a faculty person coming in the mid-1990s, someone who grew up squarely in the Conservative Movement, came to the Reform Movement because by the way, I was not allowed to apply to JTS. And my own rabbi told me that being a rabbi was not a job for a woman, I should become a social worker.

And entering a space of true pluralism was such a comfort to me because I was so much more at home in a diverse space given my own identity and my own pulls toward different pieces of Jewish life than I was in either the Conservative Movement where I was raised or the Reform Movement where I was trained. So, it really felt like this unique space where I belonged.

Rabbi Hirsch: That's something that I always really resonated with about being in a Wexner space, Wexner programming as well too. I agree with what you said about the pluralistic approach, that it's rare. It's rare to be in those kind of spaces, and I've always appreciated it where it's not going to a post-denominational or we're not rooted in our particular identities, but a true negotiating and navigating of how can we share this space together? How can we be in conversation and not close doors, while also really respecting that people are coming with their own practices and their own particular identities, communities that they feel most

comfortable in almost to kind of go outside of time and space to create something in particular that exists for a period of time, so that people can interact with each other in that way knowing that they may be more rooted in other communities or ways of practice.

Rabbi Abrahamson: I love the metaphor that adaptive leadership gives us for that, Marty Linsky, Ron Heifetz have talked about pluralism as being a stew. And you come in, you're a cauliflower and I'm a zucchini and someone else is an onion, and you want to maintain, as they would say, your own "zucchininess" or your own "onionness" knowing that just by being in the room, there's going to be some exchange of flavors.

And the challenge in pluralism is to be okay with what you put in the stew and also being okay with, "You know what? I might be stretched and pushed and changed and transformed a bit because I'm in that stew with you." This tension between not being right but having a right is really an important dynamic in Wexner classes. And being both in a dynamic conversation with people who are different while not being threatened by that difference is really a sacred opportunity, especially for leaders in community who are going to be facing all kinds of challenges to their identities, which is certainly true for leaders who happen to be women who will be challenged just by virtue of their gender.

Rabbi Hirsch: I like that stew metaphor, both because I'm a vegetarian, so I like thinking about all the vegetables mixing up together. And also, I think because so many of the pluralism challenges or issues or flashpoints maybe do focus around food.

When I was on the planning committee for a summer institute, our theme was red lines in our community and what were our red lines. And we, at one point served some, I think we served a dairy dessert bar after a meat meal to make the evocative statement of typically, we defer to the kashrut practices that are stricter to make sure that everyone in our community feels comfortable, and not saying that that was the right choice or the wrong choice, just to prompt conversation for people. And it was very interesting how everyone responded to that.

Rabbi Abrahamson: I remember when I was on an AJWS trip long ago to Muchucuxcah, Mexico and there was a desire to put up an eruv around the dining hut. It was seriously a hut, and there were people in the group who said, "We are guests in a village. We cannot start putting up fences around people's huts." And there was this really productive conversation about what is Torah.

So, part of the group said, "Look, my Torah says you don't interfere in someone else's life, we're guests." And the others saying, "Well, my Torah demands the eruv." And I know it was solved, and it's interesting, I don't remember how, but it was definitely a compromise on the part of both of the parties in the dispute, and we grow from that.

Rabbi Hirsch: Well, and that's something I think that is rarer and rarer, right? That it's going to be compromise for everybody, as opposed to one group or another, having to do more of the compromising. That's a real challenge and also takes, I think being in relationship, which in many ways is the value of that cohort-based learning that over time you have the depth of relationship and the trust as well too.

Rabbi Abrahamson: Yeah, I think that generous listening, which is a phrase I really aspire to and love, is being eroded every day to just screaming, which is not conversation, and it is becoming commonplace sadly.

Rabbi Hirsch: The ability for people to listen generously outside of their own very immediate circles and perspectives, I completely agree, has eroded in the past seven months for sure.

Rabbi Abrahamson: I'm not even sure you need generous listening when you're talking in your own echo chamber. I don't know what you call that, that's just spinning your own story over and over again into the ground, if you can use that sense of a drill getting tighter into the soil.

Rabbi Hirsch: I do want to ask you about the Israeli fellows and how some of the, not just the events are impacting them and what the foundation has done, what you've been able to do to support them, but what the landscape looks like and what the future looks like for them.

And I'll add just from my own personal connection to it, that I have been a participant in one of the summits, in the climate change summit, which brings together alumni from several of the different foundation programs and an amazing opportunity to form a cross-sectional cohort involving North American leaders as well as Israeli leaders, and really had the unique opportunity to get to meet them and connect with them and put faces to who is represented by that area of what the foundation does.

Rabbi Abrahamson: I'll just go back to October 9, that Monday, we have our regular staff Zoom calls with our entire team across several locations, and our Israel team was on the call. And, of course, the only focus of the call was the massacre, and one of our staff people shared that her nephew was missing. And at that moment, they were hoping he was hostage, and that they actually had a ping from his phone in a Gaza location.

Here we are having our staff meeting, and one of your staff people shares this story. And everything about that moment just crushed us. It just became so real and so powerful. And two days later, they learned sadly that he was killed on the seventh. And it became not a news story, it just became this personal tragic event that we knew was repeated over and over and over again.

So, our alumni have been far too grateful for our presence that they shouldn't need to express so much gratitude for our being there. They are like, we are increasingly lonely. They feel their isolation in the world. They are stunned by what's unfolding in the United States. Knowing them as I do for so many years and knowing of their integrity of these public service professionals, watching them, I'll use the word small f, fight the good fight and do what they can for the common good, is so powerful.

And so, tremendously sad because they are really working so hard as professionals, not as politicians, and just feeling the crushing weight of the moment.

Rabbi Hirsch:

You highlighted a couple of things that have really stood out to me too. I took a feminist women's leadership mission of WRJ and the Women's Rabbinic Network in February over, and we focused on hearing women's voices and hearing women's stories as the key driver. And also, just to be present and show up in solidarity and to be on the ground. And there was so much gratitude for showing up and a lot of hugging.

Also, real curiosity and care for what was going on for us back at home. And I really resonate with what you said about feeling that sense of peoplehood in a different kind of way than I ever have before. And knowing that it goes both ways, it goes back and forth. I wonder if you could talk a little bit as we get into the inspiration for our podcast, which is the character of Esther. And I like to say, we celebrate Purim all year round, which is just fun, if we had to pick any holiday to just hone in on.

Esther lives in this time of intense antisemitism, right? There is a targeted plot concocted by Haman specifically against the Jewish people, and she's in this seat of authority to be able to do something about it. And that has been something that because of all of my conversations with guests happening, just thinking about how we see the connection between sitting in seats of leadership and the rise in antisemitism, how to exercise leadership in this moment.

Rabbi Abrahamson:

In all of our conversations on our various Listservs and on various WhatsApp groups, it feels like men's voices come on with a lot of authority about what to do. And I actually checked my assumptions with a couple of my colleagues to say, "Am I right?" And they sort of laugh like, "Yeah, you're right." It's not that they're not women who are interested or caring, it just feels like there's a certain assertiveness taken by male colleagues who are pretty clear and we've got to do this, we've got to do this, we've got to do that. Some have the expertise, some don't.

I've certainly seen it in a variety of, I'm very, very mindful of who's on panels and who's representing the Jewish community. And there are lots of men talking about this war in meaningful ways. And the women's voices understandably were being lifted up around sexual violence and rape in war.

So, in some understandable, and still I wish it could be otherwise ways women took up the women's issue in the war and men are taking up the strategic issues in the war and antisemitism and how to combat antisemitism in this moment. I would love to hear more men publicly representing women's voices and more women talking about strategies for antisemitism.

Rabbi Hirsch:

Thank you. It's a really fascinating answer for a couple of reasons. First, because I think that from the earliest days of the war, if we look to Israel, there has been this conversation around who is in the room making decisions and who is invited in. And then, that extends out into North America of as you were highlighting, who's sitting in those senior leadership seats, which is something that I track and pay very close attention to.

And we have that challenge of more and more women reaching higher levels of leadership, but still not reaching those top seats in some of the most significant and most major, and on the scene or potentially having the ability to speak to these issues of antisemitism and crisis who are female identified. And then, I think it's really fascinating what you said about women focusing on the do the work versus the strategic high level or descriptive pontificating, maybe if you even want to go to that level of it around what is happening because not to question the whole premise for the podcast that I have, but something that's been in the back of my mind as I ask people, as I will of you to reflect on an Esther 4:14 moment.

Esther is the one who goes out and steps up and is in that right place at that right time to save the Jewish people from Haman's plot. And at the same time, those words to her, *mi yodeyah*, who knows, maybe it's just for this moment that you find yourself in a position of leadership, were said to her by Mordecai. And I haven't said that yet on this podcast, even though at different points, it's on my mind, right?

He is the one who is a mentor and a guide, and that's... We could talk at some point about mentorship because I think that's another important aspect of leadership who helps her to see her potential and where she's at. And at the same point, he's still the one having the big picture thought about what she can do to act in this situation, and then she's the one who goes and does and act.

Rabbi Abrahamson:

I know it's always kind of hard to quote that verse because she did not say, "I was meant for this moment." And we always kind of, I think, glossed over a little bit. So, we put it in her voice, but it really isn't her voice. I'm also, by the way, aware that some of the greatest voices at the moment are rabbis who are female identified. They have a platform. But it's interesting that they're in the community business, not the strategic planning or policy business, but I think they are informing that, which I want to underscore.

Just one thought I have about who gives you the push or who hands you a baton of authority or influence, but we hear a lot about women in number two roles.

We look all over the map of major organizational life, and there are a lot of women who are occupying the number two roles.

I think it's incumbent upon the male identify number one to push forward those number twos. Even in highly public moments, it's the responsibility of a man to say, "You know what? I'm going to step back from this interview, or this panel, or this CNN interview, or this television show, and I'm putting you out there," because otherwise change won't happen.

And I also will say, and this is not some false humility, I don't think it's my observation about when I was in an Esther moment that counts. I think it's how the organization sees me in that moment.

Rabbi Hirsch: If we asked your staff, what do you think they would say was one of those moments?

Rabbi Abrahamson: I'm sure they would articulate how I manage crisis, which we've had our share of the last several years and telling them to do the work they were hired to do and let me absorb the crisis. I'm sure the decision to leave Harvard, they would say was an Esther-esque moment of saying, "We're going to do this fast. We're not waiting weeks and months to decide." I'm thinking about the fellowship communities and the heritage communities and the Israel communities. I think they would probably say that my Esther-ness lies in my capacity to be transparent and emotional, while also being influential and unafraid.

Rabbi Hirsch: One other way that Esther has really fascinated me for our time period in our era around the level to which women have ascended in the Jewish field, so that we are both in and beyond of increasing their ability to lead and in higher positions of authority, but in many cases, not arriving at those top seats. Thinking about Esther, she fascinates me because she does hit the highest possible place that a woman or a Jew in her ancient context could achieve for leadership to be the queen of Persia. Yet, she still faces so many barriers to her leadership. It is a risk to her life to go and even seek an audience with her husband, the king.

And I've really been fascinated by that understanding of her ascending to that height of power and still facing those barriers. And I'm wondering, if in addition to any further thoughts you have about how that is showing up in our moment and in the field overall, if you've faced any barriers in your leadership journey?

Rabbi Abrahamson: I will share on this podcast that I was told that I could not do a job when I entered into placement after HUC by two organizations. I was literally invited to an interview for a prominent congregation. The senior rabbi said, "You are my first choice, but you have a child. So, I wanted to ask you if you could tell me who the second choice would be because I trust you given your recommendations." And I was told at another interview or a URJ camp position that there's no way I could assume this position because I had children. And if



there was a fire at camp, I would save my own child first. You can't even make these stories up.

Rabbi Hirsch: It's a podcast. So, you couldn't see my face sort of with my shocked eyes that those things were said to you. And yet, also I completely believe that they were said to you, because I have heard other people be told similar stories.

Rabbi Abrahamson: What's interesting to me is that there was nobody to tell. There was nowhere to take these horrible transgressions and say, "What are you going to do about it?" That's really how the WRN was born, which you probably know. This is where we brought those stories and supported each other and tried to move forward.

So, those are the formative stories of who I am. By the way, I'll also add that when I was at HUC, we used to have these assessments from our advisors, and my third year, I was told I did not have a rabbinic personality or the necessary rabbinic presence to succeed. Now, I guess those stories could have defeated me, but they motivated me because I knew from my own. And here, I'll give the URJ, which was then the UAHC Camp Movement a lot of credit.

I knew by virtue of my success in the camping world that I could lead community. And then, I did have the capacity to lead community. And several of my camp colleagues surrounded me one day at camp and said, "You've got to be a rabbi." So, I really relied on my peers to push me forward, and I'm still friendly with all of those people who turned me down.

So, those stories just continue. But something inside of me said, "I have something to give to the Jewish people, and I'm not going to let individual ignorance keep me from my own journey." I'm blessed with chutzpah. I'm blessed with a mother who gave me that chutzpah, and that has certainly been helpful. I think a sense of humor mattered. You can get more allies when you can laugh about yourself and others.

And I think that a lot of barriers less obvious persist. I think we've told ourselves the stories that women have arrived, but they haven't. And I know from personal conversations that there are women who are ready to take the number one job, they then meet with the board and they decide, you know what? They say, they're ready. Everything about the experience is that they're not ready.

So, I think there's a general consensus that women ought to be in number one jobs. I don't think there is a thoughtful enough strategy within organizations themselves to make sure that that seat really is ready for a woman. And that just has to happen. The Jewish world needs to listen to the voices of women when they say, "I was treated unfairly."

My interview was definitely not the same as my colleagues, even though on paper, same salary, and same benefits. When I got into the room, it wasn't the

same. I think we have to keep lifting up these stories because there's a little bit of a myth that everything's okay. I'm sorry, every single woman or people who care about advancing women have got to refuse to sit on all male panels. It feels like an old story, but I do it all the time and I hear the same response. "We could not find a woman." it's just time. Stop it.

Rabbi Hirsch: And I think it's both the allies, the male-identified leaders who are helping to, whether it's hand that microphone to someone who's in the number two seat, or to reflect the more accurate reality and to prioritize who's there in front of them. And also, something that I'm quite sure I learned at a Wexner Summer Institute from Rabbi Joanna Samuels when she was at Advancing Women Professionals, that it's not about a problem with women entering into the top seats and taking on the 80-hour work week. It's a problem with the 80-hour work week for everybody.

And I really think if we want to talk about the leadership pipeline problem overall and the burnout problem and the challenges of leading nonprofits, it's far less about this isn't going to work for women either because they would choose not to, because their families, or because of biases that people have about them being able to handle those types of roles. But that there needs to be a fundamental shift for everybody, or we're going to chew up and swallow everybody who chooses to go into these kinds of roles, and bringing more of that balance into our Jewish communal spaces, organizations, congregations, and communities overall is going to enable everyone to thrive.

Rabbi Abrahamson: I am optimistic, we're going to transform the Jewish world ultimately to be really a space that's equitable and fair. And I want to thank every Jewish professional across the landscape of Jewish life. Every single one of you, leading organizations, leading communities, there's not enough words of gratitude for what you've held these last years.

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 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 moment next time.