

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 Tarlan Rabizadeh.

Last week, we spoke about what it means to welcome people in to say yes, to figure out what barriers exist in our communities, congregations and institutions, and to work toward a new way forward. This week, my guest, Rabbi Tarlan Rabizadeh continues to reflect with me on this topic on many levels. Rabbi Rabizadeh is Vice President for Jewish Engagement and Director of the Miller Intro to Judaism Program at American Jewish University. She was ordained by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles. As best she knows, she is the first Persian-speaking woman to become a rabbi. We talk about how her example has inspired others. As she reflected elsewhere, "I want to make a difference long-term, not only for this first generation of Persian-Americans, but also for the next. And especially, I want other girls, daughters, wives, and mothers to feel that they too can break through the norms that have been set before us. I want them to also have a shot at discovering who they really are, who they have the potential to become."

Certainly, Esther is a model for this kind of leadership as she ascends to the role of Queen, unique for both a woman and a Jew of her time, and then taking action when the moment required it. Rabbi Rabizadeh is also an activist, and we talk about the crucial awareness she's raising both about the diversity and richness within the Jewish world, and also the humanitarian crisis in Iran, especially for women, girls, and minority groups. I started out by asking her to tell us a little bit more about her family and her story.

Rabbi Rabizadeh: My family is from Shiraz, Iran. Both sides of my family are from the same city. My mom and dad were both in the United States for college when the revolution happened my dad was in Villanova right outside of Pittsburgh, and my mom was at UCSF in San Francisco. They eventually met in LA when the revolution happened and their parents like, "Don't come back. Just stay there, and we're all going to come and join you." They met here and thus I was born. First generation here. Farsi was my first language, didn't speak a lick of English. Sometimes I wonder if it was because they thought eventually they might go back. They weren't really sure at that point. My grandparents were fairly religious, I would say. I mean, middle Easterners don't really have Orthodox conservative reform. It's more of a spectrum, and most people are pretty either religious or you're not. It's almost like Israel. You're either secular or you're religious.

There's a mechitza growing up where men and women sit separately. My parents grew up that way and didn't want it for me, so they sent me to a reform school. They liked the emphasis at Stephen Wise in Los Angeles on Hebrew and less on Halakhah and things like that on Jewish law. They wanted more Hebrew and Israel. They love that. I would say my grandparents had a huge influence on me. I mean, growing up sitting in the women's section of the synagogue was just awesome. My grandma taught me how to pray, when to stand, when to sit. They made a big impression on me those years, of seeing how people really cried their hearts out when the Torah came out of the ark, really prayed. I don't think I ever really saw that again.

Rabbi Hirsch: People want to be so rational about it as opposed to just feeling into it.

Rabbi Rabizadeh: Yeah, what's rational? What's rational about how I'm here and you're here? What's rational about it, that you look the way you look and I look the way I look? It's art. Someone created this idea, or something. At least that's my understanding. And if you want to call it science, that's fine, but someone put those pigmentations out there in the world, and I call that the creator.

Rabbi Hirsch: Could you tell us about what you work on and what you're doing now?

Rabbi Rabizadeh: My main role as I'm the director of the Maas Center, which holds a bunch of different programs, the largest one being the Introduction to Judaism Program. It's like a Jewish one-on-one of basics of Judaism for anyone who wants to convert, but also there's plenty of people that were born Jewish that just didn't learn enough or grew up very orthodox and weren't allowed to ask questions, so they come back and they want to learn more.

I think what was really interesting, or surprising, rather, for me after October 7th was that a lot of my conversion students were calling me for different reasons. Some were asking me innocent questions, many of them coming from the Catholic faith and saying things like, "It's not like I ever had to have a relationship with a Vatican, so why do, as a Jew, I have to have a relationship with Israel? I don't even understand the connection." That was one side of the spectrum. And the other side was people saying, "I didn't really understand what antisemitism was or that antisemitism and anti-Zionism and all of that was conflated until now. My husband is Jewish. It always felt like, yeah, I converted to Judaism, but I didn't really get it, and now I get it. Now I'm on the inside." They felt suddenly that they were also being targeted.

And there's something beautiful and fascinating about having fresh eyes in the religion, having people kind of come in and tell you, they always ask general questions like, "Rabbi, why do you guys carry a Torah and dance around with it?" It makes you kind of reevaluate and ask yourself, "That's a really good question. I don't really know. I have to go look that one up." But with the Israel thing, or even antisemitism, really having people come into Judaism and be like, "Whoa, this is real. They really target you when you wear a Jewish star around your neck, it's not a joke. These Jews aren't lying. It's real," and I'm like, "Yeah."

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So it's been a lot of counseling and it's been a lot of also terrified rabbis who just don't know how to address it. They're like, "Tarlan, how am I going to teach this class? They don't even want to listen about Shabbat. They keep asking me about the current events, how do I respond?" So it's definitely been challenging.

Rabbi Hirsch: It's really interesting, we're working with URJ on setting up an intro cohort, but making one that's a female identified space. That's a project we've been interested in doing for a little while of a female-only intro cohort. And I've been hearing also from friends and colleagues who are teaching intro that having that safe space for Israel is really important, a processing space for people.

Rabbi Rabizadeh: Yeah, it's interesting. My family is very traditional in the idea of becoming a female rabbi was just completely foreign to them. So eventually after I worked and then I decided, "No, I really want to go back to HUC and become a rabbi," I remember asking my mom's cousin, "What should I focus on when I go? Should I really focus on Halakhah, Jewish law, or should I focus on ritual and prayer?" And he goes, "Israel." He looked at me like I was crazy, like, "Obviously Israel."

Rabbi Hirsch: Right, that's what you could help to share with people because of your rootedness in it and how they could understand you pursuing education.

Rabbi Rabizadeh: Yeah.

Rabbi Hirsch: We studied at rabbinical school together, started out in Israel. At that point, you were studying to be an educator in the education program, and I was in my first year in the rabbinic program, which you later studied in. Can you tell me how Israel was a part of your path or that experience? Was that your first time in Israel? And how was that a part of your journey?

Rabbi Rabizadeh: Oh, God, no. We used to go to Israel all the time as a family in the summers or I would go with friends. I went to a Jewish high school, so all of my friends were Jewish, and many of them were Israeli, so it would be fun to just kind of tag along with them and meet their families. I think that Israel was always an important part of my own Jewish identity. I guess from my family, being a daughter of immigrants, my family is Persian, Iranian immigrants. Israel saved so many people's lives in the revolution in 1979, so it's always been a part of being Jewish. It was the Jewish homeland for me. And I think when I came to HUC, I didn't actually know that it wasn't the deal for everybody. It was a really an awakening to be at services and hear from people that Israel was not necessarily some place that they felt was home to them or accepted them or that they needed to have a relationship with Israel to be Jewish, which was hard to hear. But the challenge of listening to that, anytime someone disagrees with you or pushes, you start to think more deeply about it. So it was fascinating, actually.

Rabbi Hirsch: Tell us a little bit more about what it's been like to be a woman and a rabbi.

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Rabbi Rabizadeh: It's not easy being a female rabbi in my community, I think. It's certainly a lot easier than if I was in a Syrian community or Yemenite or Moroccan community. They're much more traditional, much more strict. I would say Persians on many levels are much more open-minded, and I kind of see that because of the roles between men and women. Even at Shabbat, when I go to my cousins' Iraqi in-laws, there's never really a time where the men go in the kitchen and help. But in the Persian tradition, I can see men help, which is not often, but not rare, something that I don't take for granted because in such a strict Middle Eastern world, it's nice that they give women those kinds of opportunities.

But I think that as a female rabbi, I've had to study more, be prepared more. I don't like that I can sometimes be a little harder than I really want to be. I like to be a soft person, and I can't be because I'm always ready for a comment, and it comes more often than you think. But I think even in my role as a rabbi who really welcomes people into the Jewish fold, it's really helped me to teach them about different denominations, different ways of doing Jewish, and letting them say, "Hey, guys, don't ever feel less than that you weren't born into Judaism. Let me tell you how it works. You might go into a room," again, I'm using my own sensibilities as a Persian in a largely Ashkenazi world in America to say, "People are going to say to you, we all have cheesecake on Shavuot." And you can look at them and be like, "There was no cheesecake in Iran, and we celebrated Shavuot," and to just remind them that there is no all about anything. I can give a comment or response about a Jewish law, and you can go down the street and someone else will give a different response, and that's the beauty of Judaism.

Rabbi Hirsch: I like what you said about helping those that you're working with who are on a path to Judaism not feel like they're less than, because there's that sense of the different identities that you carry where you might've been made to feel that way or at some points are made to feel that way, and you help to create that spaciousness, that opening for people who are on a path to Judaism to understand that they don't have to be told that they're less than.

So I was really excited to talk with you about Esther because of the strong connections, which I hope you'll get into between Esther's story as a Persian Jewish queen. The concept of the podcast comes from the verse from Esther where her uncle Mordecai says to her, "Who knows? Maybe it's just for this moment that you find yourself in a position of leadership." So if you put yourself in Esther's shoes, has there been a moment for you or you were like, "This, this is the moment. This is the reason why I'm here doing the work that I'm doing"?

Rabbi Rabizadeh: I think there's been many moments. One of the moments was when I was helping officiate my friend's wedding, which is the first time I was really up there in the Persian community. And I hadn't become a rabbi yet, I was a rabbinical student, but I did part of it. And I came down afterwards and people were just surrounding me. And one girl came to me, Persian girl, and she said, "I wanted to become a rabbi, and my parents said no, so I'm studying psychology, but I wish I knew you existed because I would've done it." That was probably one of the first touching moments that helped me understand that I think the

best thing that we could all do as human beings is be ourselves, and that creates a ripple effect for other people. When you see it, you're like, "Wow, I can be it." And by the way, that's how I became a rabbi. Rabbi Sharon Brous was my Mishnah teacher. And to see that she could do it and she could do it so well, and I respect her.

Rabbi Hirsch: No, that's a beautiful story, and I completely agree. You have to see it in order to know that you can be it. But you did that without an exact model, even though you had different people who set the path for you and were a model for you.

Rabbi Rabizadeh: I think trailblazing is really hard because you're looking to your left, you're looking to your right. You take someone's advice and then you're like, "God, why did I do that?" You really can't. You have to kind of take your own advice, but take everyone's advice and funnel it through you. But I think what really resonates me, always I think about Esther, is she used her femininity to get what she wanted, which she might get slack for in 2024, but it was what was at her disposal. When I taught that in high school, I would always teach about the difference between power and authority. It really resonated with me because she didn't really have the authority to walk into her husband's court unannounced, considering what happened to Vashti, and that was a setting, like a precursor, like, "By the way, if anyone speaks up and is a real feminist, off with your head."

So this woman, it wasn't just that she was brave, it's that she used her power. She put on *malkhut*, she put on her majesty, which so many people say means different things. But she kind of got into gear as a queen and walked in. And I think about that all the time, I think about how we often, as women, we think that we need to act like men to be even. When we were thinking about our smicha and our ordination and everyone was like, "We're going to be called *rav*." And I was like, "You know what? I'm going to be called *rabah*, the feminine version. I don't need to be *rav*, a rabbi in Hebrew, just the way a man is. I'm going to be *rabah*."

Rabbi Hirsch: Yeah, it's a choice now.

Rabbi Rabizadeh: Yeah, it's a new thing. It never existed before, and guess what? It's even, I don't need to copy a dude to be a real rabbi. Not that I'm criticizing anyone who chose *harav*, I kind of get it, and at the same time, it's like she used the strengths she had at her disposal, and I think there's no shame in that. But the idea is to get to your end goal, so if your end goal is to save the Jewish people, then you're going to do what you need to do.

Rabbi Hirsch: She used the tools that she had at her disposal at that particular moment.

Rabbi Rabizadeh: Her femininity, her charm, her knowledge that the king likes to party. And I don't think it's only about women. I think it's about all minorities, but anyone in

a tough situation with a tough boss or a tough organizational system or a government that won't change, whatever it is, let's not think about going through the normal paths. What can we do creatively and what gifts do I have that God gave me that could help me get what I need?

Rabbi Hirsch: Yeah. You've said a couple interesting things in that. First is sometimes you have to think about the fact that you are creating a new pathway, and sometimes you need to figure out how to lead within the context that you're in given the restrictions that you have, and maybe a lot of those barriers are put up based around gender.

Rabbi Rabizadeh: I'll tell you, my grandmother, who taught me probably everything about how to do Jewish, I always say, she passed away in May. I chose not to lead the funeral because I wanted to be a granddaughter, but I led the end of shiva and everything, and there was a *mechitza*, but I was up there. So men and women sitting separately, completely traditional. You say what are the moments where I'm like, wow? I stepped into gear, but I kept the context the same. I said, "I'm not changing the tradition. If you guys want to sit separately, I love it. I actually love being around women and feminine energy when I pray, I don't want to mix that up. But maybe it's time for a woman to lead." And I think it was just wild, because when my dad walked in, he's like, "Are you going to make us sit separate or what?" And I said, "Yep, please sit over there. Mom's going to sit over there. And I'm going to lead." And I think it was revolutionary for them because it wasn't mixed seating, but it was me leading tradition, which really boggled their mind more.

Rabbi Hirsch: You created an entirely new context, because normally the context would be separate seating and a male identified rabbi or spiritual leader, and at the same time, you opened up this opportunity for something completely new to happen, and you did it all in the context of bringing comfort to your family.

Rabbi Rabizadeh: Actually, just thinking about it out loud, I wonder if there's any communities where they sit separately and a woman leads. That'd be really fascinating.

Rabbi Hirsch: Yeah, I think in Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem, they were one of the early communities that has separate seating, and women could lead Kabbalat Shabbat before Chatzi Kaddish, before you got into Maariv, so they could have women, they could have instruments. So I remember going to that service for a couple times, and also really beautiful music that they had for that.

Rabbi Rabizadeh: Yeah, that's my dream. My dream is to have a synagogue like that, but to have a "tri-chitzah," for those who want to sit with their partners or who don't identify as male or female, but there is that opportunity. Because I don't think there's room anymore for people to come together as women. I oversee our only non-Orthodox mikvah. The amount of people that fly here from even Israel to convert their surrogate or whatever it is, their baby after it's born, it's just unbelievable. No non-Orthodox mikvah in all of Europe. And one of the programs that we started is to have women come, non-binary, and I can't tell

you the feedback we've gotten. They've really missed it. They've really missed being together as women. There's a world now, even at services when we call people up to do the candles before Shabbat, everyone is welcome. And I remember someone saying to me like, "No, there's one thing that they kind of gave to women, and I want to keep it. Let's just be together as women." And I don't know, there's something really special about this ancient ritual of male energy hanging out together, women energy hanging out together, and of course opening that up to people who identify differently.

Rabbi Hirsch: How to create those spaces for women to take on more leadership but not give up traditions that are meaningful to people, especially if they're based in gender identity.

Rabbi Rabizadeh: Yeah.

Rabbi Hirsch: Can you tell us a little bit more about some of the organizing that you've done around what's currently going on in Iran and how you got involved in that and how it's been meaningful for you and your community?

Rabbi Rabizadeh: It just sort of happened. It's so funny that people think that I kind of am this activist, or they called me that. I woke up one day to news of Mahsa Amini, this Kurdish girl who was just going down to the city, Tehran, the big city for the weekend with her brother, and that she got arrested because her ankles were showing and a piece of her hair was out of her headscarf. And then she gets into a van, and then when she gets to the detention center, she collapses on the camera. And then they do further investigation and they find out that they had beaten her so hard in the van for having shown a piece of her hair that that's why she collapsed when she got into detention, and then she went into a deep coma and she died. It was outrageous.

I think my fight now is really against religious extremism, I don't care what religion. No extremism, no. These are supposed to be guides that help you be better. When I saw that, I started posting and making it my business to post because it reminded me of all the stories my great aunts and uncles and grandparents told me about what happened in Iran, but for the first time ever, it was captured on social media. I felt like the world needed to do something about it.

Rabbi Hirsch: Not everyone would do that, though. Not everyone would even get active about it or get inspired about it. I think so many people feel so numb to it, and I think also you have the connection in to Iran, you have the connection in with your family to be able to make sure that that story is emphasized because it's not something that's hitting the headlines or news that people are hearing about every day.

Rabbi Rabizadeh: But think about how outrageous we got about George Floyd, as we should have. But imagine that's happening on a daily basis to women and anyone who

identifies as queer, or anyone who defends the women or defends any of those minorities. On a daily, there's executions that happen on a daily over there, and they're all like 20-year-olds, 18, 16, 14. What is happening? And the world is still silent, and I really don't understand it. I don't understand it, and I think about it all the time. It's like, what is the deal that we're not stepping up?

Rabbi Hirsch: Have there been other ways that you've tried to work on addressing this issue or making it more in the public sphere for people to understand the impacts on women and girls?

Rabbi Rabizadeh: I educate about it. I talk about it. We have Persian groups and I've gone to those. And a lot of this has been really traumatic and triggering and bringing back a lot of memories that people wanted to put away. For my parents, they really miss Iran because they were here when the revolution happened. But for my grandparents who witnessed some of the atrocities, they never want to go back.

Rabbi Hirsch: Could you tell us, because one thing that I'm making sure to highlight is a wide variety of Jewish experiences, in your case, the Persian Jewish community, but also the Persian Jewish community in LA.

Rabbi Rabizadeh: Yeah, Los Angeles is known to be also called Tehrangeles, it's even on the Google Maps, it's hilarious, or Irangeles, because not all of us are from Tehran, but you could catch the drift. It was interesting even living in San Francisco, which is what, five, six hours drive north, no one really knew that there were Persians that are Jewish, which was so fascinating to me. So yeah, after 1979, Persians, moved to Hamburg, Germany, a lot moved to Italy, a lot moved to New York, a lot moved to Canada, Toronto, but the majority of Persians moved to LA. I seem to think it has to do with the weather, but I also think that lifestyle is just more conducive in so many ways to the way Iran was. It's interesting, in LA it's really the Ashkenazi Jews versus Persians. There's a little bit of Moroccan, definitely Israelis, Iraqi, but nothing like New York where it's a real mix. It's really the majority is Persians.

What stands out to me about the Persian community as someone who's kind of traversed both worlds is they're very spiritual and ancient ritualistic. One of the things that Persians definitely pride themselves for is, one of them, the Esther story, because in addition to the Torah that's written on a scroll, the only other story that's written on a scroll or parchment is the Megillat Esther, the story of Esther. So there's a deep pride as if that story is super legitimate, but also just the rituals of the kohanim, the high priests going up on the bema. And some of the ancient things of, I don't know, *kapparot*, which sounds archaic to so many people, the killing of a chicken and blessing it and then cooking it and giving it to the poor as a form of tzedakah, is something that I was completely grown up around. My grandmother would do it all the time, just like things like that they brought from ancient Iran that was still alive and well, that I haven't really seen amongst other cultures.

But I remember in North Carolina when I was an intern, someone asked me, "Hey, Rabah, when did you convert?" And that was just so funny because I'm Persian, so I'm a little darker than most Ashkenazi. And I looked at him and I'm like, "Convert? Does it look like my people walked through the desert for 40 years or your people walked through the desert for 40 years?" It's a joke, but it was also a little bit of a truth, which is that Iran had the largest concentration of Jews. Babylonia, Iraq, Iran outside of Israel. When the Second Temple was destroyed, that's where they went to. And so, often when I hear about rituals in the Talmud, in our law books and things like that, and I read some of the words, first of all, some of the words because they're Aramaic are Farsi and I understand them, but also a lot of the recipes for how to make haroset, for example, that are in the Talmud, about what you need to put in it is exactly what we put in it as Persians. And of course it's a point of pride, and then I'm like, "Oh, the American one is just apples."

Rabbi Hirsch: That's very cool. I love especially that image of opening up the Talmud and seeing your family haroset recipe, to see yourself reflected in the text, where then maybe it was many more centuries before you could see yourself and your community, your identity reflected more mainstream in Jewish life.

Rabbi Rabizadeh: I've been teaching this conversion class for 10 years. Only the last year I've become the director of the program. And I used to always teach it the way it was given to me. All of these Ashkenazi rituals, how to make your bubbe's babkas. At one point in San Francisco, I had people from Bangladesh, and I started to bring in different recipes for things to teach them. And at the end of the 18 weeks, one of them came up to me and said, "Rabbi, I have to tell you, I thought marrying Ari would mean I would have to eat pickled herring for the rest of my life, but you made me realize I could bring my grandmother's curry into Judaism." It's moments like that where you realize that when you are yourself, you inspire others to be themselves, and it's no small matter. So post what you want to post on social media, and if someone pushes back, guess what, that's Jews do, we push each other back, it's all over the Talmud pages. We argue, not everybody wins. And that's cool, it's about the process, not about the answer and the end goal. So that's my final message is just be who you are and allow people to ask questions about it and grow from it, and don't be afraid of it because you're actually not in control of who you are, god made you this way, so just shine.

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 justforthispodcast. You can also follow Women of Reform Judaism at 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.