

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 this week is Rachael Fried. The way we move through time is punctuated by special days and holidays by observances and celebrations. We may live in the rhythm of the Jewish calendar. Shavuot, our holiday of *matan Torah*, of receiving the Torah, of Revelation and wisdom, is fast approaching. And we live in the secular calendar as well, with those in North America moving towards summer, the conclusion of an academic year, and holidays and vacations ahead for many.

This week, we turn the calendar page from May to June. May is a month to celebrate and honor many communities. May is Jewish American Heritage Month. May is Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. May is many things, and May is also Mental Health Awareness Month. As we begin the month of June, we begin Pride month a time to celebrate a affirm, honor, and fight for the LGBTQ+ community, originally established to commemorate the 1969 Stonewall Uprising.

These day, week, and month-long special events and celebrations are valuable ways to highlight different communities and identities. My guest today, Rachael Fried, is the executive director of JQY, Jewish Queer Youth. It's an organization that works at the intersection between mental health and LGBTQ+ awareness, pride, and support. So it's very appropriate to share our conversation on this first week of June.

JQY supports and empowers LGBTQ Jewish youth with a special focus on teens and young adults from Orthodox, Hasidic, and Sephardi, Mizrahi communities. JQY fights to ensure the emotional and physical health and safety of this population. As Rachael shares in our conversation, a guiding principle for JQY and her leadership is Elu V'Elu, these and those, or to say it another way, two things can be true, many things can exist.

Elu V'Elu represents productive tension, a pulling in two directions, like sitting in the liminal place between the month of May and the month of June, like feeling joy and pain in one space, like celebrating successes and also knowing a struggle continues, like feeling welcomed and like the one who is doing the welcoming. As the leaders of JQY articulate this philosophy, Elu V'Elu affirms both Jewish and queer values. Identities live in dialectics, not binaries.

We celebrate pride together this month with Rachael, JQY, and all those both rejoicing and fighting for LGBTQ inclusion and equality this month and every

day. We began our conversation with me asking Rachael to share with us how JQY got its start.

Rachael Fried: JQY started when the internet became available to the masses. There were a bunch of students, young men at Yeshiva University, who were not out, and suddenly the internet became available and they were able to, for the first time, connect with other people who were either part of Yeshiva University or part of the Orthodox community in some way, and they were able to find each other. And so that's how JQY started. The first meeting was in 2001.

It's come a long way since then and been through a few different iterations, but the need that it stemmed from is still exactly the same, which is basically the need to have support and community and be a part of something that is bigger than just you. And that's something we talk about a lot at JQY, this idea of collective self-esteem. That you are an individual with your own identities and your own baggage and stuff, but also you're a part of something that's bigger than just you.

So that was how JQY started. We shifted the focus... At that point, it was more for young adults. As people started coming out at younger and younger ages, we shifted the focus to a much more youth focused. So the age range that we work with now is 13 to 23. We're essentially direct service provider, so we have a clinical director who is a psychologist. Our programming always has this mental health aspect in mind.

Even if the program itself isn't let's say a clinical program, there's always some kind of component that is focusing on the mental health of the participants and bettering their lives in some way.

Rabbi Hirsch: I was thinking about how when I was a congregational rabbi before being in my current role at Women of Reform Judaism, that we were really mental health first responders.

That's one way that I really like to think about people serving in the rabbinic congregational clergy, because people may be coming in as you're describing for a social event or some kind of a meetup, but there's always that lens that some folks with a greater or a higher degree of training to be able to say, "Maybe this person is telling me or showing me something about themselves and finding the doorway and the pathway in for this to be a safe space."

And then also really being aware of some of the deeper needs that they have, whether it can be directly addressed in that context or as we always taught, refer, refer and make sure that they're getting the support that they need.

Rachael Fried: Yeah, totally. Our mission at JQY, the reason we focus on Orthodox, Chassidic and Sephardi, Mizrahi as our specialty area is because those are communities that tend to be less accepting of queerness and queer people. There are a whole

bunch of other parts of the Jewish community that fit into that category. The main reason why we focus on those communities is because of the rejection and therefore the mental health struggles that are a result of that.

So our target audience is purposely a population that needs a little extra support and a population that we say sort of like people who would be falling through the cracks otherwise, where they're not out to anyone in their communities, they're not out to anyone in their families, and so their families and communities don't even know that there is support that's needed for them or don't understand the types.

And so JQY is meant to be The Trevor Project of the Orthodox community. We're like that kind of thing where our goal is really just focusing on mental health, but also community building being a part, as you said, of building resiliency and strength and happiness levels.

Rabbi Hirsch: Have you formed any partnerships or had worked within those communities, Orthodox, Chassidic, Sephardi, Mizrahi communities, to strengthen that? Or are you working more outside of the sphere of those communities? Because I'm always interested in hearing about the partnerships and coalitions that people are building in order to exercise the leadership that they want to.

Rachael Fried: Yeah, it's really interesting because there are different types of advocacy and activism. So there's the working from within a community, making sure that there are people that you have individual connections with and that there is slow systemic change that comes from that type of work. And then there is the more protest activism me type of thing where the way of getting things done is by having rallies and signing petitions and basically making a big deal from outside in order to change the "other side" that you would like to see changed.

Our main philosophy at JQY is Elu V'Elu, which means both these and those, and it's the idea that there can be simultaneous conflicting ideas that are true at once. And so that really applies in this regard. Also, the idea that there are these two types of activism and they're conflicting with each other. You have to build the relationships, or you have to publicly do whatever it takes to have the other side change what they're doing or change their way of thinking.

But I believe that it's really important to have both. And so we do some work from within the community. A lot of those collaborations and partnerships are not public because a lot of people, they're not in a place where they're thrilled to be working with JQY publicly. But behind closed doors, they're happy to work with us and we can together create incremental change in different ways, in ways that are necessary that can be really productive and really helpful to support let's say students within an institution if we can work with the institution behind the scenes.

We don't need to have our logo on it in order for us to be making change with them. That being said, there's also the other side when necessary, speaking up on behalf of the community. Most of the participants that we work with are closeted and are not out. And so part of the responsibilities of JQY, one of the most important parts I think is being able to be a voice on behalf of those who can't be. And sometimes that means saying things that other people might not love or might not want to work with us on.

We try to find the balance between those things. But we do have a lot of other organizations that we work with, that we partner with in different ways. There are some mental health organizations. There are some of the other LGBTQ+ focused organizations in the Jewish world and outside of the Jewish world that we work with. It really all depends on what the scenario is, what the thing that we're working on is.

Rabbi Hirsch: I'd love to hear if there is a story that stands out to you of the power of the work that you do.

Rachael Fried: There was a person who came to our drop-in center. So in Times Square every Thursday night, we have this drop-in center and anyone ages 13 to 23 can come and have a hot kosher dinner and meet with mental health professionals as they would like and have check-ins and conversations as necessary and as they're interested in. And they can be with other people like them, meet friends, make a community. So there was a person who came recently to our drop-in center, and he was very nervous about coming.

And this is something that people really experience. A lot of people before they come to the drop-in center will say that they walked around the block three times before they mustered up the courage to walk inside, or they signed up for something and then didn't show up, and they signed up again. And on the fifth time they signed up for something, then they felt like, okay, now I'm ready to go. So it's a hard thing to walk into the drop-in center for the first time or to any queer space for the first time.

This person was really nervous and didn't know anyone and didn't know if he would know anyone once he did walk in, which is always another big fear. And when he got to this space, introduced himself with his Hebrew name, which he said he's never been in a queer space before where he's been able to use his Hebrew name. So normally in his life growing up, he went by this Hebrew name. And whenever he went to a queer space, he would switch to his English name because it just was all kinds of complicated.

And he said, "This is the first time that I've ever been able to have these parts of me sort of combined at one time." But that kind of thing happens a lot where people say, "I never thought that I would be able to be part of a Megillah reading," let's say. We're talking about Esther here, right? So part of a Megillah and Esther reading and feel like I've been able to relate to it in a way that's... Actually my queerness is related to this in a few different ways.

And I never knew that I would be able to celebrate in that way or to relate to this text in that way. Just the idea of being able to come and be your full self and not have to check any parts of yourself at the door, that's always, for me, the most moving and the most important part of the work.

Rabbi Hirsch: That's amazing. I love the example through the name because the name is so symbolic of being able to show up as your full self and to be known as the self that that individual wanted to be known as or any of us, how we want to be called, how we want to be seen. That's very cool.

Rachael Fried: Yeah, totally.

Rabbi Hirsch: I'd love if we could step back and if you could just tell us a little bit about your Jewish journey, your leadership journey, and how you came to this point to be heading up JQY.

Rachael Fried: I grew up in the Orthodox community. I grew up in Fairfield, Connecticut, so a tiny little Orthodox community. But I went to Yeshiva University basically for 12 years in a row, from high school through grad school. I would say I was very much a part of the YU Orthodox world. I found that I was always a leader in every place that I went, that I was always drawn to positions of leadership, which I have a theory. That leadership is another form of outsidership, that I felt like I was different.

And rather than being off to the side different, I was like, I'm going to be a leader and I'll be above kind of different. So for me, there is a part of my leadership that I feel like comes out of almost a coping mechanism for feeling different and needing to find a way to be comfortable in my being different. I started coming out to myself when I was studying in Israel for my gap year after high school and before college.

As I started paying more attention to the conversations that were happening around LGBTQ people and scenarios, I noticed that there was this idea of the community needs to figure out how to be welcoming of these people. And I in my positions throughout the years had always been the welcomer. And so I was just like, what do you mean? You're talking now about welcoming me, but I'm supposed to be the one who's welcoming others. How can this conversation have shifted so much for me so quickly?

At some point, as I started coming out, this became more and more prominent in my life and I decided that I wanted to do something to change that. That it doesn't need to be the community including me and other people like me, but that we are just as much a part of the community and we're even leaders in the community already, and that we can be welcoming you. I got involved in JQY specifically as a participant actually. I had a friend who had recently come out and he said he needed a wing person to go to this support group that he was going to.

And at the time was like, well, I don't really need to go to a support group, but I'll go to be your wing person because you're my friend. And when I got there, I pretty immediately realized, I totally need a support system like this and haven't really had a place like this. I did not know that I needed something like that. And then the second I got there I was like, I really need this and other people really need to know about this and really need to be able to take part in it as they choose. That's how I originally got involved.

Rabbi Hirsch: To hear that you came in through personally experiencing the benefit of what JQY has to offer, even that you went with a friend and weren't necessarily seeking it out, and then I'm sure that that enables you to relate to so many people who walk through the doors who have the same kind of experience.

I'm hearing from you a little bit both the story that you shared about the individual and then your own path, that those are two stories of fulfillment and joy and finding your place. I would imagine that JQY is also and the groups and the support and the staff and people that you work with there also are a container for pain and challenge. And I'm wondering if you could reflect on that a little bit.

Rachael Fried: It's something we talk about all the time at JQY as a staff, that the work we do is so heavy and comes with so much pain and so much struggle. We work really hard to be a place of joy, not to validate the struggles or the pain, but to be able to say, yes, you have a place where you can process all of these feelings and you can find other people here who you maybe have similar experiences too in this way.

Maybe you have similar pain or similar struggles that you're going through, that those are acknowledged here and that this is a place of uplifting participants, of uplifting JQYers, and of just being able to be in a place that is colorful and bright and not just sad. And a lot of what we do at JQY is we talk about this word decatastrophizing. So that when you're struggling with this thought or maybe you're like someone's questioning their gender identity, that yes, that feels like a big burden sometimes or a big load to be carrying.

And also if we can decatastrophize that and say like, "Okay, you're questioning your gender identity. Here's a place where you can try on different pronouns if you want, and here's a place where you can... When you get to JQY, feel free to change your outfit into something that you would normally not wear outside of JQY, or use a different name here and see how that feels." And to say that you're not making any permanent decisions by being here and testing out different things, but just trying it out and seeing what happens.

And that's the vibe and culture is we are a bright, colorful place of joy and we are a mental health resource. So it's a yes, and. But we always want to be the uplifting voice that shows that being queer is not just being sad and being bonded to people over shared trauma.

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Rabbi Hirsch: It's totally that Elu V'Elu, the both and, that you were talking about. It can be there is pain and challenge and difficulty and here's the joy. And I'm also hearing in what you're saying the idea of a *nechemta*, of maybe you're going to be in this place of difficulty, but we're going to have an uplift and we're going to bring ourselves maybe not up to a peak, peak high, but to bring everyone up by being together. So I love that.

Something else that I was thinking about that's Elu V'Elu, that's both and, and one way that I like to think about and relate to the story of Esther and leadership is she gets to this very high level of leadership, the highest possible place that a woman or a Jew could get to in her time period in ancient Persia, and yet she really has a lot of powerlessness. She's not even technically allowed to go before her husband, the king, without being invited in.

So I'm wondering if you could reflect as we think about women in leadership on this podcast, as we're thinking about queer people and the work that you do, what are the heights of leadership? How far have we come? But also what are the barriers and the challenges that we're still facing today?

Rachael Fried: We've come so far and there are so many barriers. I always want to hold both of those things, and I'll talk about the barriers and also acknowledge that the conversations we're having now are just so different than the ones that were happening five years ago and 10 years ago and beyond. And that a lot has changed in a positive way.

I think that there are a lot of times where me as a queer person am not able to be the right leader for something because that kind of thing needs to come from an ally who is more "accepted" in the mainstream part of the community. And that to me is very frustrating when... And that's not just about me, that's about queer people in general in different positions of power in certain ways, but who can only reach a certain point without needing allies in some way to help them get there.

And that's true for all different kinds of marginalized groups of people and minorities. And that happens because I'm a queer person who is out as queer and because I am a woman.

Rabbi Hirsch: I like to ask each of my guests if you have had a moment like in Esther 4:14 where she steps up for leadership just for this moment.

Rachael Fried: When I was an undergrad, I always thought I would grow up and be an artist one day. I still identify as an artist, but it's not the primary way I spend my time. But I majored in graphic design and thought that, okay, I'm going to be an artist and this is the way to be an artist and make some kind of money. And at the same time, I was on student council. And I joke that I have a double major in graphic design and student council. That was very much a huge part of my undergrad experience.

And I worked in a graphic design department of a university for a year and totally hated it and found that it was super boring, and I wasn't really able to be working with people and building community in the ways that I really wanted to. I was looking for this student council moment or opportunity in life. And I went to social work school so that I could do something that was more about community organizing and just working with the people side of things. There wasn't a ton of room for the creative things that I wanted to be doing.

And I found this program at Parsons, it's called Transdisciplinary Design. Basically I would describe it as systems design for social change. And it was working with systems and using design thinking and figuring out how to make change from within systems and structures and all of that using design and using the systems and the people that are at play within those systems. I never really knew what I was going to do with that while I was in school, but around that time is the time that I went to JQY for the first time.

And I remember that I got there and one of the first things I saw was the JQY logo, and I was like, this needs a serious revamping and a brand makeover. And I just had this moment of this is what I've been building towards my whole life. This is the thing that I now have all these things under my belt to uplift this organization that already exists in a way that it deserves to be uplifted and more well-known.

And so all of these different things that came into play in my education and in my experiences and student council, all of those things came together in the form of JQY. It was just for this. Everything came together for this specific thing.

Rabbi Hirsch: The skills and the talents and just who you are as a unique individual was all building towards something, but then you needed to see JQY to see that that was where you could apply it. And also that's an interesting lens on leadership to see where something is at and the potential of where it could go. You came to it, walked into it as a completely volunteer run organization.

And even though you might not have known every step that you were going to take to get it to be at this point now as the leader of it and leading up a staff and a much more robust organization that you knew that you were situated for it, but you also saw the potential of where it could go.

Rachael Fried: Yeah, totally. And to me, that's the creative part and the artistic part. It's not a blank canvas, but it's a canvas of sorts that now you can use your creativity to figure out what this could be and to think about what are the ways to get to that place.

Rabbi Hirsch: I love how you framed it as that's the creative part, taking that artistic part of yourself of what could it be and seeing the potential and how you're going to create and how you're going to fill that out.

And while JQY is more established now, but more in the startup, newer space for Jewish organizations, I'm at a legacy Jewish organization and I think that really similar principles can be applied when you take something that has a lot of structure, a lot of history, a lot of different elements to it that are really well-established, and then run different experiments on the inside and see if I try this, then what that might enable us to do, all knowing that it's on a strong foundation and you're playing from within the system.

Rachael Fried: And sometimes that can make it easier, and sometimes that can make it harder. It depends on the systems at play and all the different parts and what you're trying to do and how much pushback you get. And yeah, to me, that's all part of the creative process.

Rabbi Hirsch: We connected with each other, we met at a wonderful program put together by Leading Edge called Leading Executives for people who are within their first five years as a CEO executive of a Jewish organization. And we also, even though we weren't in the program at the same time, are alums of the Wexner Fellowship and have talked a little bit about the value of cohort-based leadership learning. I wonder if you could reflect a little bit on what the value of that has been for you.

Rachael Fried: Yeah, so super valuable. I'm a huge fan of cohort-based anything, mostly because I think one of the things that's so important is being able to connect with others who are either in similar positions or can understand certain things in a way that others maybe can't, especially being in a position of leadership where often there isn't someone in the organization that's like "horizontal" where I can confide in other coworkers.

But I've found that when I have a cohort of other people who are in similar positions, the ability to even just having the option to rely on those people, whether it's about venting or more logistical of what process do you use for your budgeting system and what are your policies and protocols at play. This is something we're struggling with. Has anybody here figured this out already so that we don't all have to reinvent wheels? And to me, that's a huge deal.

The learnings that come out of all these experiences are also really important. But for me, it always feels like it's more about the people that are part of the group than what we even discuss in the group. It's almost like the things that come up in the discussions and the sessions and seminars, those are just catalysts to kick off conversations and connections among the people that are in the cohort.

And then I also am a huge fan of coaching. That has been a huge part of my life and my leadership journey and just being able to understand myself in this position. So yeah, I would say that the cohort experiences and just the people that I've had a chance to meet and the coaching part are really important. Also, I'm an introvert. I can go to networking events and I can meet other people.

But in order for me to really have a connection with someone, it takes me a little time. And so to be able to have a cohort where it's not just like we met at a dinner and then we kept in touch, for me, that's harder to do. And so I love this being able to form a connection over time with different people that are part of a cohort.

Rabbi Hirsch:

I love exactly that you said that, that you're an introvert, because one of the things that I've loved both about cohort-based learning and about coaching is that I'm an extrovert, and the way that I express that the most is I like to talk things out. So I love being in groups of people who are brought together through a connection, a shared desire to learn, to lead or similar work environments and roles, and then to talk it out and to have people and to know that as someone who loves to learn, that the learning comes from the group.

And that coaching is great for that because you can be reflective with the coach. But especially in cohort-based learning, like in Leading Executives or in the Wexner Fellowship, that you don't have to have all the answers only on your own. And that some of those most amazing insights or thoughts are trying to figure things out to unravel something or come up with an idea comes not from one person having the idea, but generative and through different ideas building on each other through a group coming together in that process.

I love to engage in a practice of bringing a case to a group and to present that and to share it and to ask people for their feedback. And always, whenever I come away from that, either participating in sharing a challenge that I'm working through or being the person in the group who's helping someone work through a case that they want to present, an issue that they have before them, then it's about this idea builds on that idea and they all come together.

So it's not even just, oh, I'm going to go ask one person what they think, that the group really builds something greater than either one person or two people could come up with on their own.

Rachael Fried:

Yeah, I really relate to that. I mean, there have been times where my board has said, "We're talking about revamping this policy and we're not really sure which way to go." And I've said, "Well, let me see if I can ask my cohort of fellow executive directors what they do," and being able to get a few different answers from a few different people. And everybody else also gets to learn from the question that I asked that my board wanted to know about this very specific thing. It really plays out in tons of different ways, and I love being a part of a cohort.

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

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