

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 Tiffany Harris.

The prophet Isaiah wants us to welcome everyone in. As he describes a future utopian view of the world as it could be serving as God spokesperson, Isaiah declares “Ki beiti beit t’filah l’kareh l’chol ha’amim” -- for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. In general, Isaiah speaks from a place of universalism tending toward inclusion, even as his prophecies and teachings are rooted in a particular Jewish context.

What would a house look like that truly welcomed everyone in? This question roots my conversation with my guest today, Tiffany Harris. As Chief Program Officer at Moishe House, Tiffany thinks deeply about how the doors of their physical houses and broader engagement opportunities can be open for all. Tiffany also brings her own story to our conversation, as we reflect on barriers and doorways to leadership, both for women and for Jews of color.

Earlier this month, I charged those gathered in New Orleans for our Women of Reform Judaism Fried Women's Conference to consider these same questions, questions of welcoming, inclusion, and belonging. What if we welcomed everyone in who wanted to be part of our Jewish communities? Despite differences, disagreements, and diverse points of view, what would it take for us to say yes to everyone who wanted to engage with us? What if we said yes? We each have an active role to play in transforming our world from the world as it is to the world as it could be. From a house of prayer and gathering for some people, to the prophet Isaiah's house for all people.

Tiffany and I began our conversation with me asking her to tell us more about the work she does at Moishe House.

Tiffany: I have the privilege of serving as the Chief Program Officer at Moishe House, and in a nutshell, Moishe House is a global organization and we are focused on providing meaningful, home-based, peer-led Jewish experiences to young adults in their 20s and 30s. We say we're post-college, pre-family, and we provide tools and training, as well as some financial support that really allow them to create vibrant, home-based communities for other young adults. And we give them the agency to create and sustain Jewish life in their homes and their communities. We started in 2006, which is crazy to say we're almost 18 years old, and we engage about 80,000 unique participants annually through our different programs. We started out with just Moishe houses, as our namesake, and today we have more than 12 programs that help us fulfill that mission, from our

Moishe houses and our home-based peer-led programming, to immersive experiences. Adult summer camp, which is happening this weekend, we're all really excited about it, even a cruise, a program for interfaith couples, and a program that allows for one-on-one study with a rabbi or a Jewish educator. So, a lot of different ways to engage folks Jewishly, and it's heavy, complicated work right now, which I know we'll get into, but it's also really, really fun and fulfilling. And I think this point in time that we're living in just even more so highlights the meaning, and importance, and the richness of this work. So, I feel very fortunate to be in the place I'm in, and getting to be doing the work I'm doing.

Rabbi Hirsch: So many different avenues, doorways, pathways and programs that you have, which I think is a testament to the fact that people need different access points, depending on their journey, where they came from, or where they're at in their life and just what they're interested in, what they're looking for, to have those multiple access points is so important.

Tiffany: The thing I wanted to add to that is that for so many years I heard a Jewish journey being described as a pipeline. Like, "How do we get more people in and out of the pipeline?" And just that visual of pipeline, it's sort of like, all right, we get people in this funnel. They're all moving in the same direction at the same time, same speed. It feels kind of homogenous. And I heard at some point, I don't know, it was maybe like a Hillel conference or something with URJ, but it was described as more of a web, which I know is not so nice imagery of spiders, but think of a web of Jewish life and their multiple access points, and on ramps, and off ramps, and different ways that you can sort of move throughout that system. And so, I like to think of Moishe House in that way, that it's more interconnected and people come in at different points in different stages, but they're all different ways for them to plug in and be engaged.

Rabbi Hirsch: Yeah. One of the texts from the Tanakh, from the Bible, that's always inspired me is from the prophet Isaiah... that my house should be a house of prayer for all people. And if you think about that, then it would be a really long line for everybody to get in through one door. So, I've always thought about that verse as inspiring like a house of prayer or a building that everyone's going into that has a lot of entrances and exits as the way that people can get in.

Tiffany: I love that, we need to take that and put it somewhere. We also have this focus on just radical hospitality, and being authentic and welcoming. So, wherever you are in your Jewish journey, whatever your knowledge is, but also however you define your own Judaism and what Jewish life means. So lots of entry points, whether it's a window, or a door, or a crawl space, we want people to be able to get in and experience all the richness and all the vibrancy of Jewish life.

Rabbi Hirsch: I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about your own path, your own journey.

Tiffany:

In talking about my own Jewish journey, I'll talk a little bit about my family and that background, but I would say I grew up with a strong Jewish identity, not in a religious household. We didn't celebrate most holidays. I learned about some holidays just as an adult, which I now celebrate, but always had this strong sense of being Jewish. And my mom would always say, "We are Jewish, we're proud to be Jewish." And so, when people would ask me, "What are you?" Because people are listening here so they won't be able to see, I'm Black and I'm Jewish. So, I guess the question I would get a lot growing up is, "What are you?" And I would always say, "I'm Black and I'm Jewish," and people would say, "Well, Judaism is not a race, it's a religion." And that whole argument. But I would always proudly say that, and it's always been a real integral part of both my race and my identity.

My mom is Ashkenazi, she's from Westchester County, and that side of the family that's in New York and New Jersey all came from Hungary. They were at the point they came to the states very focused on assimilation. So, my mom grew up with a Jewish identity, but also not in an observant household. And for her at that point in time in the '40s and '50s, I think Judaism was very static and distant. It was all in Yiddish, and also tied to traumas in some ways. And for me, it's been something that yes, you receive, but you also contribute to, and shape, and reimagine, and transmit. And so, I feel fortunate it's been a very rich and rewarding part of my identity and my life.

And then my dad, he's Black. He was born in the '40s, and he grew up in the Jim Crow South. He's from Birmingham, Alabama, which he still calls Bombingham because of the racial violence, or rather terrorism that he and his family experienced. And my great-grandfather was born a slave, and the generations after that were tenant farmers, and then later factory workers, which we know is very, very difficult labor. He joined the Air Force, and that's he got out of the South and ended up meeting my mom, but the rest of my family is still there. And for my mom, she just didn't understand racism. It was something that she just couldn't conceptually understand. It angered her, and she just really couldn't wrap her head around it, even though she also experienced that growing up Jewish in the '40s and '50s, even in New York, and then later within her own family having a relationship with my dad, who's Black.

So that's kind of ironic, but I grew up with this very strong sense of tzedek and tikkun olam and that this integral legacy, and I guess ancestral memory of some of the greatest injustices committed in the world, and that I feel like I, and really everybody has a responsibility to right some of those wrongs. And so, that means being an active citizen and giving back, and volunteering, and being proud of our Jewish identity are really all of the racial identities that I've had. Throughout that I've had a lot of luck, and I've worked hard, and I've had some amazing mentors, but I also, knowing the injustices that have happened in the past and what that history looks like, feel a very strong sense of responsibility around giving back and also pulling others up with me.

It was very early days of birthright. I think I was on bus eight or something like that, but I had this opportunity, it was like go to Israel for free. Growing up, the way my mom described it was like this aspirational place, and she would always tell me, "There are Jews in Israel who look like you." And I always thought it's like Mom's just being nice. It's like, "You're perfect and you're normal," and all those things. I'm like, "Yeah, right." But I still really wanted to go to Israel, and that was a really pivotal point in my life. It really meant something to go to Israel, and it was the first time I saw Ethiopian Jews. It was actually also the first time I saw and learned about Sephardic Jews, and I just felt this overwhelming sense of home, and of belonging.

I think growing up as a minority in this country and as Jewish, you always sort of feel like something else. Like, "I'm American, but I'm also something else." And I just felt totally happy and at home there in a way that is even hard to describe. Of course, the more time I spent there, because I lived there many years later, I understand that it's very complex socially and politically, but that experience always sticks with me and really just led me on a path, not only of being interested in geopolitics, which is a space I worked professionally for many years, but having just this deep appreciation for Israel in all of its beauty, and complexity, and to Jewish peoplehood.

Going on that trip, it was the first time I'd gone overseas, and so it also just sparked this passion for geopolitics and global work, which I did for a number of years. I ended up moving back there for grad school after doing the Peace Corps in Morocco, and lived there for a few years. And then after that time, I came to Washington DC. Coming back to the States after living in Israel for a few years, you know when you're in Israel it's like Jewish life just happens, and the Jewish calendar is the calendar. And I came back and I realized, "Oh, I need to find a Jewish community here, and I need to figure out how I participate in Jewish life because it's not something that's just all around you." And I found the Moishe House and ended up moving in. I had done volunteer work before, but I never considered myself a leader in the Jewish community.

I wasn't super confident in my knowledge. I mean, as I told you, it's like we didn't really celebrate most of the holidays growing up, and so being a part of the organization I built local partnerships. I got to plan and run programs for the Jewish community. I got a lot of training in leadership, and also I had a rabbi for the first time that I felt very close to and was able to study with this person, and develop a relationship. And so, I always felt indebted in some ways that it's like I gained so much from this amazing community, and to always want to give back. And four years ago when I went into this position, I was working at Amazon. I really loved my job there, I felt like it was really interesting, but when this opportunity came up it just felt like this incredible opportunity to give back, and to help give others the experience that I was so thankful to have and that really changed my life, both personally and professionally.

And it's been an amazing, amazing role. I've gone through some wild times here through COVID, the war in Ukraine, which is still ongoing, and now October 7th, but to be able to help provide and facilitate meaningful Jewish experiences for so many people around the world, and to really have and build this global network, and to get to do things like this just feels like the ultimate privilege. So, I'm still on a Jewish journey, I think we all are, but that's how I ended up here.

Rabbi Hirsch:

Thank you so much for sharing your story, and what you bring to this moment, and where you're at now. I resonate with a lot of what you said. I grew up outside of Boston in an area that if you went to the town to the left or the town to the right, it was very thick Jewish community. But in my particular town, the school system that I was in, there were very few other Jewish students. So, in high school I did the Reform Movement's semester in Israel. That was my first time in Israel, and for the first time I had that experience of not having to explain, and living on the Jewish calendar, and really feeling it in that way.

And then that disjointedness of when you come back, that Israel, even with all of its blessings and challenges, doesn't exist when you're not living on Jewish time and in that Jewish environment as much. And I also love what you shared about when you became a participant, a resident of Moishe House, that you had access to a rabbi. And it sounded to me, and I'd love to hear a little bit more about this, no judgment of what you were bringing, what anyone else was bringing, that you had the ability to study with this person. It was everyone was welcome, so it didn't feel like there were barriers up based on what you came with and what you were hoping to learn.

Tiffany:

On your point of going to Israel and being on the Jewish calendar for the first time, and really seeing Jewish life in that way, I was just blown away by the diversity I saw in Israel, not only racial and ethnic diversity, and religious diversity. You would go on the beach and I'm like, "There's somebody walking around in a bikini," a bikini that even makes me blush. And then right next to someone who's ultra orthodox. And it's just like, where can you see that variety of Jewish life in such a small space? And then just this tiny, tiny country in the Middle East and all of, again, for all of its blessings and challenges, everything that it accomplished, I found it just such a moving and inspiring story. And again, there's work that we need to do. But yeah, I love hearing others just pivotal experiences with that first time that you go. Throughout your life, you have these inflection points.

But I think I was still at a phase where my identity was still being formed and shaped, and to be able to have access to a really amazing rabbi and educator. And I was in that phase, like a lot of young adults now, where I was confused about what I wanted to do with my career. I was having roommate challenges, because living in a Moishe House is amazing, but it's also really difficult to have a full-time job and to be working with your roommates, and running your house like a community center. And so, I had this person that I talked to, and I remember I brought a roommate challenge that I was having. My roommates,

by the way, are still two very, very good friends of mine, who I'm going to see next week actually, to pull text, and thought, and questions from this 4,000 year old tradition.

That was kind of the first time I realized that it was like, "Oh, Judaism is also this incredible blueprint for how we can live and also transmit a meaningful life in that way." So, we're able to give that now to others. I think right now about 25% of my staff are rabbis or Jewish educators, so it's become a growing focus of the work we do, and really built into our strategic plan. But the need is so, so great.

Rabbi Hirsch: To bring a roommate challenge, something that you're working through or know at different points in your life trying to understand how to interpret maybe something unfortunate, something difficult that happened, and to have the access to that, and to see how Jewish text can speak into life, that it doesn't have to be Judaism over here and life over here, that they can be integrated with each other.

Tiffany: I started to have this idea that it was like, "Oh my, Judaism is not just ..." I don't even know if I can describe how I saw before, but it almost became my skin in some ways, that it's like I cannot separate this from any other part of my life. And that experience with the rabbi we had at the time really helped me start to see Judaism in that way, that it's like you don't take it on and put it off. It is a part of you.

Rabbi Hirsch: Absolutely. One of the things that I love to talk with guests about that's really related to that, because we think about a text that speaks into life, is the idea of a just for this moment. Coming from the point in the Book of Esther and the Purim story where Esther has become queen, she has overcome many significant barriers, both as a woman, as a Jew, even though she's been hiding her identity to reach that level of leadership, and then she finds out that the Jewish people are under threat, all of them, and she's uniquely positioned to be able to do something, to make an impact, and to hopefully to save them.

And she has a lot of choices in that moment, and she chooses, at the risk to her own life because she's not allowed to go and speak with the king without being invited to go and to seek an audience with him, and to try to stop Haman's plot. So, I love to ask my guests this question of, if you've had a just for this moment, like Esther, where you've been in the right place at the right time and stepped up to lead.

Tiffany: I often think of my leadership a little bit more like Moses and less like Esther some ways. And not that I'm this amazing leader leading the Israelites out of Egypt, but in the sense that I can be a very cautious leader, and sometimes hesitation or concerns about my ability to accomplish what's in front of me. Or I have that sense, or sometimes I have doubts in my leadership, or feel overwhelmed. So, Moses often comes to mind in those stories, and we know that we have of him, but luckily I've had great people around me. And like

Moses, I sometimes need reassurance, but I do hope that these are elements that as a leader make me more human, and increase my empathy, and that they don't ultimately define my legacy or effectiveness as a leader.

But time will only tell. My just for this moment, I think is in 2020 when I came into this position. I think a lot of us have COVID amnesia, which I'm not sure is necessarily a bad thing, but remembering back to what we were as a global community and as a country experiencing then amid lockdowns, a lot of polarization around vaccines and so on and so forth. And this was right after the murder of George Floyd and this big racial reckoning that we were having as a country, and again, arguably as a global community. I know in the city that I live in, there were just massive protests every single day. And so, I assume this new position at that point in time, which very light time to step into a big leadership role, but that's when I came in here.

And Moishe House and a lot of Jewish organizations were really ... I think there are a lot of spaces, URJ in particular that had very progressive views around racial justice and training, and so on and so forth, but really re-examining that, and how can we be a place of welcoming, and again, help write some of these injustices. So, I led many of our DEI efforts with a task force, and thankfully I had the support of an incredible CEO, an incredible HR director.

We were able to together transform so many of our policies, have really, really courageous conversations, put the necessary trainings into place, and I think we were really able to transform our organization and the experience that our staff as well as the communities we serve have, and really built DEIA and is a key pillar of our strategic plan, and just how we want to lead and influence as an organization. So, I feel very thankful that I was able to bring in pieces of my personal identity and my past into this work, because it was a moment where we really needed that. And I think the muscles that we built during that period in time, and the systems we put into place, have also helped us respond to global challenges like the war in Ukraine and what's happening right now. So, that might've been maybe one of my Esther moments.

Rabbi Hirsch:

So true, both to you and your story, and your path, and what you bring to this moment, and also to Moishe House, to the organization, which is intent on making people feel welcome and have a doorway in. This is something that I think a lot about at WRJ, Women of Reform Judaism, as a feminist organization where when we think about how do we express our feminism today, it has to be through the lens of who is outside and who are we welcoming in, because for so long women were excluded and were the ones who are outside. Then what does that mean today to bring that lens to it and think about who is not included today, to expand those efforts to gender equity, to inclusion of people across the gender spectrum, and also to think about racial diversity and making sure that we're making people feel comfortable, welcome, and embraced when they come in.

Tiffany: It's wonderful. And I mean, this is Jewish life. This is our global Jewish community. We are diverse and multifaceted people, and I really believe, and I know Moishe House does as well, that we really benefit from those diverse perspectives and identities as a global Jewish community. And in order to sustain ourselves both now in this moment and in the future, it requires all of those voices to be present and active, and to feel a sense of belonging.

Rabbi Hirsch: Let's talk for a moment about a topic that is in the news, on people's minds, in conversation in Jewish circles and communities and beyond. In the Esther story, the Jews are facing antisemitism. That there is hatred from Haman and the people in the court who say, "We have a problem and we're going to get rid of all the Jews," sort of like the most basic way to understand that part of the plot. And antisemitism has ramped up, ratcheted up, we can look to statistics or we can just go to our own experiences. I know drawing from my own personal experiences and how I felt moving around the world as a Jewish person in the past several months, certainly since October 7th, but even growing before then. I'm wondering what you're seeing from your seat, from your leadership role at a global Jewish organization, and one particularly serving that post-college and pre-family age group, and how antisemitism is playing out in your work.

Tiffany: Yeah, I have a panel coming up next week, and part of what I'm talking about is this rise in antisemitism, and the person organizing the panel was like, "And I think you should bring in statistics." And as I was looking at the statistics, it seems unbelievable. I'm like, "Okay, it's almost a 400% increase in one year, and the year isn't even finished." And so I'm like, "Are people even going to believe it?" Because it's a number that is difficult to comprehend. But yes, all that being said, both in my life as you were saying, but also in our Moishe houses and the communities we serve, right now anyone participating in Jewish life, but I'm thinking particularly young adults, they face significant safety and reputational risks due to their Jewish identities, and their leadership roles in the Jewish community.

One of our houses in the UK, they let us know they were going to take their mezuzah down because they were scared. There had been a lot of graffiti in the neighborhood and some strange things caught on their security camera, so they took their mezuzah down. We had another woman, she's a doctor at a hospital in Texas, and she wears a star of David around her neck, and she faced antisemitism actually from her supervisor. So, now she wears a button that says, "Ask me about antisemitism," and she talks openly about it, but again at great risk. And just the other story that comes to mind right now, because a lot of this, we're looking at what's happening on college campuses. Those are future Moishe House leaders who are graduating soon, but we had someone who's actually a grad student and his career counselor advised him to take off all of the Jewish leadership roles and engagement off of his resume so that his career prospects would be better.



So, we're hearing the stories, we're seeing the statistics, and it's really sad and it's really disheartening, and I think that all of us as Jewish communal leaders and an organization really need to just continue developing strategies to combat the loneliness, and isolation, and the fear.

I think one of the greatest anecdotes around this is just the ability to experience Jewish joy and a sense of pride in your Judaism, and that comes from these fun events, and being able to have Jewish friends, and be in Jewish spaces, as I talked about before, leverage Jewish tradition and wisdom as a means of support, and to just allow people to build stronger connections with each other. I think that that's a great anecdote, but it is a very, I think sad and difficult time, but I'm also like, "We're Jews." We are going to get through this. We are a smart, and resilient, and scrappy-when-we-need-to-be bunch, and so I'm very confident we'll be able to weather this period, but those are the things we need to do in the interim to sustain and support young adults.

Rabbi Hirsch:

Right, it can't only be the story of difficulty and challenge without diminishing that, but also what are we building for? We're not just continuing Jewish life and continuing Jewish community so that we can continue to struggle and have those challenges, but we're building something that people love to be a part of, and that they feel fulfilled and connected when they're there. I'd love to talk about another part of the Esther story, her arc that really inspires me, and I think is an interesting way to approach her character, which is that she has become queen. She's at this level, and she has certainly more power than others, more authority than others, but in the scheme of things her power is limited.

She's reached this level and she risks her life in order to go before the king, and she's 100% the queen in a patriarchal system and not the king, not the ultimate ruler. For me, I think that this parallels a lot of what we're seeing in the Jewish world, definitely beyond, of women reaching certain positions, a level of leadership, power and authority, but not being able to break through to a certain level. And I'm curious if you have any thoughts on this, reflections on this, either personally or what you've seen in the field, and also if you could comment on this as a Jew of color, being able to reach certain points and then not pass through those barriers?

Tiffany:

I think that some of the challenges I face have sometimes less to do with my womanhood and maybe more to do with race and my upbringing. We still have a very, very long way to go from where I personally sit in a developed economy, with employer-paid healthcare thanks to Moishe House, and a relatively legal framework, at least in the state I live in, and it's something we still need to fight for around women's health and motherhood. I feel like I'm living in a time of unprecedented support, and freedom and agency. Again, we still have a very long way to go, and that's not the case for every woman in this country, and particularly not in the developing world, but it is something that I don't take for granted and I feel the need to address in my advocacy work outside of Moishe

House. But as it relates to the question, I didn't grow up in a big Jewish community similar to what you were saying, and we grew up very poor.

We were on food stamps, and we were food and housing insecure for much of my childhood. I mean, I remember we were anemic as a result of that, and I didn't go to camp, or Jewish day school, or have some of the connections that really help you enter the community and that also open doors. And so, I think I just had to work a little bit harder and with more intention, I think to build those connections. When you grow up the way I grew up, the margin of error feels razor-thin, and if you don't have any financial or family safety net, it's really terrifying to make a mistake. And that continues to, when you're in a leadership role, those things are a hurdle, a little bit of a setback, but for me they haven't been insurmountable. So, sometimes where I feel like this affects my leadership is that I can be a little bit less of a risk-taker, or perhaps less innovative in some ways as a result of the caution I tend to exercise.

And I think race, for me as a Jew of color, does play a bit of a role in this cautiousness. In any leadership position I think there's a different level of scrutiny, so very aware of how my success or failure in any position not only affects my own leadership but could affect all the women who come after me hopefully in this role. Just always have this sense that I don't want any action I take to really set back progress for women or for racial equality, and that representation in a Jewish space. So, I'm very aware of that.

I think those are some of the unwritten rules of being a woman or a woman of color in a leadership position, and I try to mitigate this by surrounding myself with people who are creative risk-takers, and really push me and challenge my decisions or my outlook. And I think that's also where allies come in, to surround yourself with people who can help you push against that. And I think it's really, really important, because again, the challenges that we're facing today as a Jewish community and as leaders in an organization, they are going to require some creativity and some risk taking, and a level of comfort with ambiguity that I am still working on.

Rabbi Hirsch: That's a lot to carry though, to feel those added burdens and also to know that the actions you're taking and the choices that you're making will have an impact on leaders who come after you.

Tiffany: It's a lot to carry, but I'm getting amazing quads or calves, or whatever it is, that it's like these difficult experiences, in some ways it's a burden but also a blessing. I know that sounds very cheesy, but I think it helps you grow and build the muscles that you need to be able to respond in some of these difficult situations that we've experienced. Growing up I was always really sad that I didn't look like other Jewish people, or that I was different, and that I was always asked, "What are you?" And was always sad that I had this background where it was like I couldn't afford to go to camp, or this or that, and now I'm really thankful that it's given me a lot of resiliency and perspective that I do use

as a leader, and was not at the time but today I'm very thankful for that background and also the legacy I have with my family that's in Alabama. I think that also helps drive some of my thoughts around inclusivity in the Jewish community, and how I show up to lead.

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, 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.