

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 Rebecca Soffer.

The sociologist Emile Durkheim teaches us about the concept of collective effervescence, that when many come together in a joint communal experience, they become greater than the sum of their parts. Durkheim originally observed and theorized about this idea in the context of religion. For me, so many moments of collective effervescence occur in religious community settings, singing a powerful worship melody together, clapping in rhythm, and joining in harmony.

Standing together in front of the open ark for the final moments of Yom Kippur, the Neilah service, awaiting the final blast of the shofar to conclude our fast and our day of prayer, lighting Shabbat or Hanukkah candles on Zoom during the pandemic. Each of us in our own squares, each lighting our own candles, filling our computer screens and our homes with hope, joy, and light, or more secular moments of individuals coming together as one, a concert, a march, a rally, a parade. Many individuals moving, chanting, acting together. Many of these collective moments are joyful or uplifting. Some are urgent and angry, and collective moments can also be infused with sadness, a collective response to individual grief. My guest this week, Rebecca Soffer, knows about grief. Rebecca is the co-founder of Modern Loss, a platform that offers content and community addressing the long arc of grief.

She's also a bestselling author and speaks widely on this subject. We recorded our conversation in front of a live audience at the Women of Reform Judaism's Fried Women's Conference in New Orleans earlier this month. As she shared there, her personal individual experiences led her to create something that she was looking for herself in a time of profound loss. Rebecca was an individual on her own. Where she ended up, what she was able to create with her Modern Loss community, books, and network is a place for the collective, a place to bear witness, to share stories, to support each other, a way for the individual to be part of something beyond themselves at a time that can be isolating and alienating. And in the spirit of Esther and the Purim story, a place to find joy and humor in the midst of loss and grief. We began our conversation with me asking Rebecca to introduce herself to all of our listeners and to our joyful live audience in New Orleans.

Rebecca: I am from Philadelphia. I grew up in the main line. My mom and dad, Shelby and Ray Rosenberg, we were trio. We were like an enormously tight trio. I'm an only child. I grew up going to Har Zion Synagogue, which is a conservative synagogue,

and then later moved on to Mainline Reform Temple, which holds a very special place in my heart. And I always thought that I was going to be a combination of an intergalactic DJ when I grew up, and a journalist who told very, very important stories, but also got to travel and eat really well through the reportage part of it. I grew up with a very strong Jewish identity. My parents tried to instill a deep feeling of tikkun olam. My mother was an enormously active individual. She was an education professional. She not only was a public school teacher, but also published the first education magazine in the Philadelphia area.

And she was just my person. She was my absolute person, and she was the person of kind of everyone else who knew her. She was everyone's person, cheerleader. And so instead, my life took a bit of a different turn, and yeah, I guess I'll talk about that later, but I ended up realizing I couldn't necessarily figure out the intergalactic DJ portion of things logistically. So I thought, let's do journalism. And after living in Venezuela for two years after graduating college at Emory, I moved to New York like anyone does when they don't understand exactly what they want to do after their liberal arts education, when they're fluent in Spanish, when they want a lot of culture and lots of ideas. And that is where I landed.

Rabbi Hirsch:

The theme of our podcast, for those who have been listening along the way or those new to it comes to us from the book of Esther, from the Purim story. There's this moment, the peak in the drama. Esther has become the queen, and she's been hiding her Jewish identity. And Mordecai comes to her, and he says Haman. *Boo*. That's the benefit of the live audience at home. It's just me booing. He has a plot to kill all the Jews, and Esther is the only one in the position of power and authority, as the Queen, to be able to do something about it. And Mordecai says to her, "Who knows? Maybe it's just for this moment that you find yourself in a position of leadership." So I love asking all of my guests, what's your just for this moment?

Rebecca:

I always wanted to do journalism. And after I got my master's degree at Columbia, I went exactly where any newly minted journalist would go, which is to work at Comedy Central for Stephen Colbert doing, let's be honest, God's work for me, that was journalism. That was something where I don't think that you can work coherently or effectively in satire unless you understand what you're talking about. How can you make fun of anything and be respected for it unless you know what you're ridiculing, because if you get it wrong, then you look like a fool. So for me, this was like the apex of journalism because I also had a lot of trouble keeping my personality out of my writing. And so I was an original producer for The Colbert Report. I felt like I had won the lottery, even though I was making very little money.

I had won the fulfillment lottery. I was having the time of my life. I was so exhausted. I had just turned 30. I felt like my life was really starting and cooking with gas. And boom, the universe had other plans. My mother was killed. The

night that we came back from a family vacation camping in upstate New York, my parents dropped me off in my apartment in New York City. It was very late on Labor Day 2006. I said a quick goodbye. I thought I was going to see them at a wedding down in Philly the next weekend. My cousin was getting married. And instead an hour later, I was sitting there. I still hadn't showered. I was disgusting. I was getting ready to go back to the studio the next day, and I got a phone call. That was the moment that changed everything in my life.

I think a lot of us divide our lives into the before and the after, and sometimes there are many befores and afters in our lives, these pivotal moments. And for me, this was the big one because I learned that there had been a terrible accident on the turnpike. I had to get to a hospital in Princeton, and when I did, I found my father in a hospital bed telling me, "I'm so sorry, she's gone." And so from one second to the literal next, I was in the world of before loss and after loss, right? I had to figure out how to navigate a landscape that had just been obliterated. I didn't recognize anything. I didn't even understand how to talk to my father because my mother was no longer around. Everything felt off. When I flew to India once, and the time difference was like 10 and a half hours, right? I'm like, how can that be? Something just doesn't feel right. Everything was off kilter. And I also had to work.

I was 30 and I was single, and I wanted to meet someone, and I really wanted a dog someday, and I wanted to buy a house, and I wanted to kind of get my act together and be a fully formed human because in New York, when you're 30, let's be honest, you're really not. You're just kind of like... I still had the Jennifer convertible from undergrad, and it's still there, by the way, in my apartment. It looks pretty good. But I just learned very quickly because I had to be in the world. I couldn't shy away from everything that the world didn't necessarily want to be around me. It didn't know what to do with me. My colleagues were all around my age, and the overwhelming majority of them did not know how to relate to me.

They made me feel, not because they were trying to, because they were all amazing people. Maybe they were scared they were going to catch my grief, or maybe they were scared they were going to remind me of something, or maybe they would just ignore me sometimes because it felt so awkward. And I realized, hey, wow, we're turning something that I eventually realized was an enormously universal experience, and yes, an individual one, into an isolating experience. And it didn't have to be that way. And it took me a long time. It's not like I had this very deep epiphany that I could put into words within the first few months of my mother's death. But I tell you, three years later, after my father died from a heart attack and I was left with no living parents by the age of 33, I said, "We got to do better than this. We can do better than platitudes and edible arrangements."

And so that, I would say, was my moment, my, I say Esther moment, which is when I decided, well, I feel like there's a white space that exists in how we talk

about the long arc of loss, how we make people feel or not feel normalized in a situation that is very normal. How do we talk about it in ways that show. In journalism, you show, don't tell. You show people how they can be resilient. You show people how they can move through a mess, how they can create ritual, how they can hold onto memory. How do we do all this? We don't really talk about it. And so I co-founded Modern Loss with my friend Gabby Birkner in 2013, which is, in its essence, a website that offers thousands of original personal essays, resource pieces, all narrowly focused around the long arc of loss, one aspect of it, and then since it has grown, so that was my moment.

Rabbi Hirsch: You took the unimaginable, the loss of both of your parents in such a short period of time, and you were able to see that something that might've supported you didn't exist.

Rebecca: Yeah. I was looking for it. Trust me. If Google search history had been a thing back then and I knew how to capture that, you would've seen a lot of, can one subsist solely on mac and cheese for a month? Or how do I get through this? Or dead mother, how do I take care of myself? Really, my search was probably insane. And a lot of it was between two and four in the morning because that's most of the time that I had alone to myself. Most of my days were filled with work because I had to work, I had to go to work. I had to somehow socialize. And I realized that I wasn't being offered the space to respect and examine my loss and my grief because we just want in this culture to get her done, to be productive, to kind of move through it, to get back to the old you.

And not all of us are like that, but I think that the pervasive way that we deal with grief and loss is to think that we can package it into something that has a timeline, that might have an endpoint, or that might have a point where it gets easier because that makes us comfortable with the thought. But the truth is that that's not the way grief is. And I got really tired of not feeling like we can talk about it in ways that weren't clinical, that felt accessible to anybody, and that certainly weren't anchored in it takes a year or platitudes or heavy filters online with rainbows and kittens.

Rabbi Hirsch: When I was a congregational rabbi before starting in this role at WRJ, I used to keep stacks of your books in my office because people would come in. And I like to give people books. If you talk to me for a few minutes, I'll probably give you a book recommendation. But I know that creating that book, creating the webpage, creating the resources enabled people to access that on their own, right? They might come back and meet with me more, or that might be the only meeting that we have. And I think the community aspect of what you've created is really inspiring as well too. One of the reasons that I was excited to have you come as not just a guest on the podcast, but also here at the conference with us, is that WRJ has three pillars, and one of them is spirituality and having that access to our spirituality, whether you access that through walking in the door of your rabbi's office or by connecting with a virtual community. So just wondering if you could comment a little bit on the community aspect a little bit.

Rebecca: Yeah. I'm sitting here not as a therapist. The only letters I have after my name are MS, which master's in science. But that's what you get when you graduate from graduate school in journalism. I'm not a social worker, I'm not a PsyD, I'm not a PhD, but what I have learned and what I really own is that you don't have to be to talk about grief, to talk about loss, to talk about pain and hard things, tough things, feeling lonely in them, because every one of us experiences it. And I think that what we've done in our culture is kind of pathologize the experience of grief and loss, suggest that maybe something is kind of wrong with you if you feel like your brain is broken, if you're having trouble focusing, if you don't feel like you can multitask to the nth degree like you used to, if you feel like you're moving more slowly, or if you're having a really tough moment seven years after a loss, when the rest of the world is like, "But that happened so long ago. Aren't you done by now?"

So I have realized that what people need, in addition to, of course, formalized grief support... I will always say I love grief therapists. I love counseling. I think everyone in the world should be in grief counseling in this time of enormous grief that we've all been dealing with, not just related to death loss. I think we're in this enormous grief pandemic, many, many layers of loss. But yes, sure do that. But also, what you really need is community, because sure, go to therapy, but how long is that per week? 45 minutes once a week, maybe twice? That's a lot of other hours of the day. So what fills in? The people who are in your life, and also the people that hopefully you have yet to meet in your life, not just in spite of, but hopefully because of what you are going through and what you've been through.

And I really do believe that community is the salve that people need, when things feel really, really hard, both individually and communally. It is how we pull each other through. It's how we expose ourselves to ideas that we might not ordinarily have thought about, both with building resilience, coping, creative rituals, or even just other cultures that we might not have thought about. It's an empathy builder. It helps us to share stories with each other. Deepen friendships, you have this shorthand, this emotional shorthand when you form community around your hard things. You cut each other breaks more, but also you feel more caught. And the bottom line of it all is that you feel like your burden that feels so heavy and so unmanageable sometimes. And as you say, sometimes unimaginable, is being divided up multiple times over and carry it on so many shoulders other than just your own.

And for me, that is why I do this work because it is about community. I am no more of a grief expert than anybody, just somebody who realized that they were willing to put themselves out there and say, "Okay, we got to talk about this in a different way." Sure, I'll be the one to do it.

Rabbi Hirsch: I love that idea of being in a community where folks are bringing different kinds of grief and challenging experiences. And instead of one person carrying the giant boulder, the giant rock, you're dividing it up into little pebbles, and

everyone doing that. I often love to think about the idea of community as something that becomes greater than the sum of its parts, right? When you sit in a group that is singing and the voices are harmonizing, and it becomes something beyond one plus one equals two. It's one plus one equals three. It's almost the opposite, the way that you describe it, of when you share your grief in community, then the load is lighter for each individual person.

Rebecca: Yeah, I think it is. And I'm not saying... I'm not trying to be like Pollyanna-ish and say, "And then it's better." No. Is it all going to be okay? No. But was it ever beforehand? Probably no. So it's just a different form of not totally okay after loss. And I think that what I'm trying to promote is this idea that in grief, in loss... And I'm not just talking about death loss here, there are so many types of loss that people are feeling. There's disenfranchised grief, ambiguous grief. There's so many, grief due to illness. So many people are caretaking right now. They're mourning their previous lives or what they might be giving up. And so with grief, I just think that people are looking to feel seen and acknowledged in their hard thing. And ironically, we just kind of do the opposite, which is we go out of our way to not acknowledge people in their hard thing.

It takes less energy to just make someone feel like you see what they're going through looks hard. And even though you don't know the right thing to say to them, you wish you did, and you offer that thought to them instead of just ignore them or penalize them for not adhering to your comfortable version of what their grief should look like.

Rabbi Hirsch: Let's go from one hard thing to another.

Rebecca: Oh, let's do it.

Rabbi Hirsch: Digging into the character of Esther, something that's been really resonant for me, for other guests that I've talked to on the podcast this season is antisemitism, because we can name it as simply as that, that Esther and the Jewish people of Persia in that time under Haman.

Rebecca: Boo.

Rabbi Hirsch: Good job. And Ahashverosh, they face antisemitism that they can't share their identity and that there's a plot against their life. I'm wondering if in your spaces, in your work, you have seen the evidence of antisemitism, if it's presented any challenges for you, or if you have any reflections on how antisemitism is showing up.

Rebecca: I'm sad about it because I think that grief is our common denominator, and it's something where the internet is such a God-awful place. Can we all agree on that? But one of the places where you really can find something positive in digital connection is in grief communities. They're full of empathy, they're full of compassion, they're full of people who want to hear your stories because they

want ideas for them, they want to feel less alone, they want to feel like they're having an invitation to share their stories. And in these digital communities, the beauty of them is that you can feel part of a community even if you never speak up, even if you never post or like anything.

You can still feel part of a community online. And so, it just makes me sad because I feel like it's one of those precious last good things about digital life.

Rabbi Hirsch: I'm thinking about a concept from the Talmud from rabbinic debate called a *pasuk rahok*, a distant verse. And it feels like antisemitism should be a distant verse, a distant concept from grief support and conversations and community. And the example you share just really reminds us how much the rise in antisemitism has infiltrated every area of our lives and has really impacted those are looking for safe spaces to think about, talk about something that should be a really a distant verse from the concept at hand, but really just demonstrates how much it's showing up in all corners of our world.

Rebecca: It is. It's all encompassing. It's in the writer's world. It's in the world of compassion, ironically, as are a lot of negative thoughts toward a lot of different types of people. It's not just antisemitism, but we're here talking on a Jewish podcast. And these are the things that I've seen come up, and I wonder where we're headed. I do.

Rabbi Hirsch: Something that I love about Esther's character is that she steps up in that just for this moment, and you shared yours with us. And then she has more work to do. She has to convince the court to come to her banquets and talk Haman-

Rebecca: Boo.

Rabbi Hirsch: You're getting really good at it.

... out of the way. So she has more work to do beyond that moment. And I'm curious what you've seen from your experiences, either directly in your work or beyond, about what happens when women are invited or take the space and step up to lead, and what kind of stories are they sharing? What kind of leadership are they taking on?

Rebecca: That's a great question, and I'm very hesitant to compare myself at all to Esther because she's such a rock star, but you're saying she has a tough task, right? And at the onset of *Modern Loss*, when I just had this idea and I was like, I literally can't hold it inside anymore, those are when you know have to create something, when it's just seeping out of you. And I had this idea shortly after my mom died. I was like, why do I feel so alone? Why can't I talk to anybody? I'm 30. Why isn't anyone around me? Why can't they relate to me? And I just wish that I could share what I need to share instead of them thinking what I need to share and being wrong about it. And so even when I decided to start doing this

and pulled Gabby into creating this together, people around me, including women, were like, why are you doing this?

Because people would ask, oh, what are you working on these days? Because obviously I had been working on a political satire show, so I think they thought, well, maybe she's at the Daily Show now. And instead they heard, "Well, I'm working on this really awesome online community. It's going to be about grief and loss, but it's going to be really great." And so many people would say, "Why do you want to do that? That's such a downer. That's kind of morbid. That's really morose. How are you going to make any money?" I didn't have any answer for that last question, but I just realized that those people were people who didn't get it yet. And good for them. Amazing. I never wish for anybody to feel profound loss, but the reality is that we're all going to feel it. And I think everybody I know in the world right now feels it to a certain extent.

And I really felt like, well, one day if something happens to one of their people, or pets or something, won't they be glad that this exists when they finally do get it. And I had them make this decision to kind of push out all of that noise and really trust my gut that this way of approaching grief in a way that was very conversational, had a lot of levity and humor, because we're all human beings, we need to keep going somehow. And I just kept going. And I think that it has made a difference. Modern Loss has been going now for 11 years. This is our 11th year. I have been doing this work nonstop. And since COVID, you can only imagine how hard, how much work there has been in just individual talking to people, talking to communities, writing this book.

But I've noticed that when you are a female founder and you push out the noise and you give other people a platform to share their experiences through your sensibilities, you know that people may need to share not data. Maybe they need to share feelings, maybe they need to share. You don't know what they want to share, but you recognize that you don't know. You give them the creative leeway to share their hard thing in the way in which they need to share it. I think there's real power in that. And I think that when you're dealing with grief and loss and hard things, there needs to be a softness. There needs to be a kindness, and also an ability to be quiet and let the person talk about their thing.

And so I think that there has been a benefit in being a female who has started that platform, and in terms of giving people the ability to share through their female gaze, publishing thousands of pieces over the course of a decade, overwhelmingly by women on their experiences with grief on how they feel, not how the people in their lives want them to feel, how they perceive that they feel, what it feels like to have a stillbirth experience, what it feels like to have multiple miscarriages, what it feels like to have a child killed in gun violence, their experiences, not like bereaved mother, bereaved daughter, what we like, package it up. You learn so much more, and then you're able to meet that person where they truly are because you've heard where they're at, that maybe



they don't need like this from you. Maybe they need that from you. Now more than ever, it's time to respect and elevate those stories.

Rabbi Hirsch: It's that invitation into the first person narrative. It's so powerful.

Rebecca: Can I just say, I have found that if you don't give yourself the permission and sometimes the real push to share your story and stand in your own narrative, the world will be more than happy to create that narrative for you. So you might as well take the chance to do it.

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, Lior and Mikah. Jen King designed our logo, and Eric Shimelonis wrote our theme music. Thanks for listening. We'll have more just for this moments next time.