Rabbi Hirsch: 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 Elana Arian.

What a joy and an honor it has been to invite inspiring women in leadership to talk with me each week on Just For This. It's wild and amazing that we've reached the final episode of season one. All season long, we have heard stories of bravery and boldness, of quiet leadership and powerful action. Like Esther, many of our guests found themselves in the right place at the right time. Whether by intention or chance, every leader took action. When the moment came, they stepped up. And we've been inspired by Esther in other ways too. Esther faces antisemitism, a topic that became all too present and current in the past several months. As our season unfolded, Esther reaches high heights of leadership, and yet she still faces barriers. We've shared stories about roadblocks that women in leadership still face today.

My guests have come to Just For This as individuals. They have generously shared their own stories, often taking their private pain and personal joy into the public discourse for us all. So many of our women in leadership have reflected on the power of community too. Communities of 20-somethings, communities of grief, synagogue communities, and communities based on shared values, beliefs, and vision for a brighter future. So it's fitting in so many ways that our final guest for season one, Elana Arian, will speak with us about communal singing and about lifting up her individual powerful voice in song. Elana is a composer, multi-instrumentalist, and prayer leader. Something that Elana and I have in common is that we were raised in a songleading tradition, as songleaders, as people who bring communities together through song. This informs how we show up as leaders too. You'll hear us talk and sing about the power of music to bring people together, and the ways that our individual voices have power. From the many we are one.

It was wonderful to sit in the studio with Elana when we recorded this episode, and also to have her as our artist in residence at the Fried Women's Conference in New Orleans earlier this month. These are the stories that we've been proud to share this season. We're going to keep asking questions, highlighting voices of those who might not have had a platform before, or going deeper with those who do have the public space to share about their leadership, their journey, and their vision. I'm grateful to all of our guests who spoke, thought, and shared with me this season. Elana and I began our conversation with me asking her to introduce herself to everyone.

Elana: I am primarily a composer and leader of Jewish music and prayer. Right now, the work that I primarily do, is getting to travel to different communities every weekend as a guest scholar, or a guest artist in residence, and work with the clergy team leading worship, teaching adults, teaching kids, doing concerts, and lots of other related things. Then we have this wonderful communal thing, and then I fly off into the sunset, and go somewhere else the next weekend. So it is a very unique job in terms of what that entails, and what I get to experience and the kinds of people I get to meet and seeing so many different kinds of communities. I also teach at the New York campus at HUC a couple days of the week in the Cantorial School, which is the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music.

In that capacity, I'm working with future leaders, honing worship-leading skills, coaching how to work with instrumentalists, which is a big part of my background, getting to play on student recitals and practica... Then a big part of my work is just writing music, is composing. So that's some of that is things that I'm drawn to and some of that is commission work with communities around the country. In terms of my journey to here, it's so interesting because it's never easy to answer for me. It feels like a very winding path, and I think most people, I would imagine a lot of people that you talk to didn't imagine themselves in the place that they are. I mainly feel like I am where I am now in largest part because of who my family is and the way that I was brought up, my mom, Merri Lovinger Arian is a professor at HUC, and has been for 30-something years, expert in congregational voice and teaching clergy how to harness that power, crafting meaningful worship, helping synagogues to transform their way of approaching music and community building.

So her work has been really present for me in terms of just what I'm exposed to, and the way that I naturally about those questions, what the role of music is in bringing people together, and how can it be harnessed for its maximal potential. My dad is a Reform rabbi. His whole rabbinate was from the beginning, he knew he didn't want to be on the pulpit. He was really a youth and camp-oriented rabbi. He started the Foundation for Jewish Camp. He was the director of NFTY, Head of Young Judea. Really this passion for the transformative power of camp and community in people identifying Jewishly, was a huge part of his work and a huge part of my life growing up. They both are expert songleaders and guitar players and I grew up in a little tiny havurah in Westchester County, New York.

My experience of Judaism growing up, was we didn't have a building. We had services in people's homes. It was like pre-emergent community world, and if it was your week that it was Shabbat, you would work together with a student rabbi from HUC to write the service, and we'd sit on the floor in the living room, and my parents would play guitar. I mean, it was amazing. I didn't really know that it was so unusual until I was a little bit older and going to bar and bat mitzvahs of my friends and being like, "Oh, I don't really know how to be in a synagogue." It was a new experience. So my experience of Judaism and

connecting to something holier or bigger than myself was always through that communal and singing.

I also grew up at camp from the time I was a baby, because of my parents work, I grew up as a fac brat at Kutz Camp in Warwick, New York, and was there every summer for as long, until I was old enough to go to my own sleep-away camp as a participant, I went to Camp Harlam. I was a student at Tanglewood right down here. I think the experience of the way that music can bind people together in that camp environment also has a huge role in where I am now, and just believing in the way that music and community can transform people, and transform lives, and I just so frequently saw the impact of that.

Rabbi Hirsch: I want to talk so much more definitely about camp and communal singing and how that binds people together, but I'm wondering, and this is the joy of getting to sit together, if there is a song or any music that's related to you, or fixed in your mind from any of those more formative experiences that you had? Something that grounds you or connects you maybe to the wonderful havurah that you described?

Elana: Mm-hmm. One of the things that I'm really aware of in my work now, because I'm in a new community every week and I'm a guest, so I'm learning every week what is the traditional thing for that community, or the minhag that is really sacred. Unsurprisingly, it's really different from place to place what feels sacred and what feels untouchable, and what feels really holy. There's just jokes about like, "Oh, which melody should we do for that? The traditional one." And then the traditional one is like-

Rabbi Hirsch: Trad?

Elana: Yeah, it's trad, and it's like maybe it's from 1970s in Minneapolis. Or maybe it's from the 1800s in Germany. There's really the idea of everyone's trad is really specific, and not fixed. So I'm trying to think of what is trad in the havurah. I mean my parents were shaping the musical life there, so it was a lot of music that felt important to me from camp, and a lot of Debbie's music, and a lot of Jeff Klepper and Danny Freelander and Doug Mishkin who was an important friend of my family's and someone whose music really sang.

So this is one of the songs that popped into my mind thinking about growing up at Kutz Camp, and this incredible culture of singing that's built in the camp movement. I see it still now. My older daughter Maya goes to Crane Lake up here in West Stockbridge and we have the privilege to be there for a little time to support the music of the camp, and it all looks different of course than it did. But the feeling of how central filling up a dining hall with sound or filling up an outdoor chapel with sound, and the feeling of that, is still so alive.

So this is one of the pieces that just came into my mind as a sense memory of being a young kid at camp, and in services…at Kutz which is a crumbling,

beautiful pagoda-ish thing on the edge of a lake. So when you'd sing, you could hear the sound of people's voices bouncing off the lake, and had this other-worldly quality. So this is Hiney Tov M'od by Gordon Lustig, and it has these words from Genesis, quoting the creation story, "And God saw everything that God had made and said, 'It's very good.'"

[song performance]

Rabbi Hirsch: I love that one.

Elana: Me too.

Rabbi Hirsch: It's so good. It's such a nice three-part and it also captures what I've always loved about so much of the…music of that time, where it's teaching you what it's talking about at the same time, because it does the translation, the music matches it. I mean, you painted that beautiful picture of being at Kutz, and I learned that at Eisner, where I grew up.

Elana: Totally.

Rabbi Hirsch: Standing on a hill, looking at nature. You sing that song and you learn the Hebrew, you learn the English, you learn what it means, and then you walk into synagogue, you walk into a place where that Torah portion is being read, our Creation story, and you feel it in your body and in your musical memory, because you had that experience of singing that in such a beautiful place.

Elana: Totally. I mean music has the power, the way that it is like when you smell a certain smell and it reminds you immediately of a particular place. Music has that incredible immediacy and immediate sense memory to bring you back to the context that you learned it in. Also, yeah, I think what you said about the form, and content thing, it's really important to me and my own music in terms of, and the music that I'm really drawn to, in terms of that it evokes something musically that's being evoked by the text that they support each other. I've always, as a kid, even loved ... Mysterious and a broad interval, and heaven and the earth, it's just folk music, but it feels majestic in that way.

Rabbi Hirsch: It feels like descriptive of the *tohu-va'vohu,* of the mixed-up-ness or the expanse, *rakia*, of what's going on and it's able to capture that in the music.

Elana: And then there's kind of simple, easy, predictable order in the other parts up a scale << Do-do-do-do-do-do-do. Do-do-do-do-do-do-do >> it's like… the chaotic thing and the order created by the creation. People do ask me a lot in my travels about particular pieces or particular settings of mine in terms of how thought-ahead or how thought-through is that stuff? And how much is it inspiration? For me it really is a mixture, but I know that the things of mine that I'm the proudest of, and the music that I'm drawn to the most personally, has that quality of

feeling that the music provides some *midrash* on what the text is, and not just that it sounds good, which is also of course part of it.

Rabbi Hirsch: Totally. I joke that if it's like the Mi Chamocha of like, "Oh, it's very angry." And it's like, no, it's a celebratory song. It's meant to be something where you can tell if someone has really looked into the words, and what they're trying to convey-

Elana: Totally.

Rabbi Hirsch: ... with the music that they create.

Elana: Yeah.

Rabbi Hirsch: So we already started to talk about it a little bit, but I grew up in the Eisner song leading school. Rabbi Noam Katz was one of my head song leaders, everyone who I got to connect with, and in that really thick songleading culture at Eisner, it was so clear and always stated that we were not performers. You were automatically the cool rockstar because you got to stand up with the guitar and that was fun to get to do, but it was always about music as a vehicle for communal singing. And that yes, you may need to sing solo the first round or two for people to catch the tune, or the key that you're in. But that ultimately you achieve the goal as a leader, by inviting people to sing together, so that the voices blended together.

I think that for me, songleading is the way that I show up in the world as a leader, whether or not I'm holding a guitar. That's what I aspire for. So I'd love just to hear how that sits for you, and how you've experienced that? You're both a performer and a song leader, and somebody who composes and writes your own music. So how do you integrate those things? And how do you show up as both a performer and a songleader and do that together?

Elana: That's such a great question, and I think it's such a beautiful frame to think of the way that you show up in the world is as a songleader, regardless of whether you're teaching a song or not. I really feel that in a deep way myself. I think that the work that I do now, you're absolutely right, in a given artist-in-residence weekend, some of the time I'm functioning as a prayer leader within the context of the clergy team and within worship, some of which is about songleading in terms of how I physically embody and what kind of cues and whatever I'm going to give to invite people into what I'm doing, and to have it be a communal experience. The goal is that people are able to meet you and engage at it in a communal way, and that's not about giving a performance, but helping people to engage.

I mean, you can't do any of that unless you know where they are. That there's a awareness that's not about performance, but that's about listening. You don't know if the congregation or the, "Audience," I'm putting air quotes for those of

you listening, or the kids, or the reticent adult volunteer choir, or whatever, you don't know if they're ready to do that part by themselves, or for you to add a harmony or whatever, unless you're hearing how they actually sound doing the thing that you're trying to do. And you're getting a lot of information about people's comfort level and their head space, and their also ability or whatever just from listening to what's coming out of the community. So I do like to think that's a part of the way that I show up as a leader I think, is about listening.

Rabbi Hirsch: It's very possible that I learned this from your mom in one of the worship workshops when I was a student at HUC in the New York campus where your mom has taught. And it's such a strong illustration of *kevah* and *kavannah*, right, of things being fixed. You come in, your set list of the songs that you're going to play, and the order and the melodies, and you have the plan, and then you have the comfort and the flexibility and the confidence, and even I think, the bravery and the instincts to read the room, or read the moment, and to make a change.

Not to be so stuck in the *kevah,* so rigid and fixed that, "Well, I was going to do this round three times, and to do it in the key of A." That you see that it's not working for the group, or they're not catching it, or they're really really into something. So to be able to keep going. Or even to know, "Wow, I see that everyone needs to have a little boost of energy, so we're going to switch up which Mi Chamocha we're going to do today."

Elana: Totally. I realize this is an audio medium, but I couldn't be nodding my head more vigorously as you're speaking. It actually is a big part of what I feel like I bring. I think a lot and I teach a lot about, it's definitely *keva* and *kavannah*. Another way to think about it is preparation and presence as binary things. That yeah, you better come to whatever space you're going to, whether it's to sing a concert, or to lead a Tot Shabbat, or to facilitate a meditative group or whatever with a real plan and everything is scripted out and you know the keys and the music and you're very heavily prepared.

Then obviously it takes a certain amount of experience and skill and confidence and all of that to do this, but the idea that that's the first big chunk of your job. And the second job is to be so unattached to your plan that ... I mean, I talk with students a lot about, "What happens if I've prepared my magnificent *iyyun* that I've been writing for a week…and then the melody that ended up coming right before goes in the complete opposite direction and it's going to really make a huge disruption in the experience that people are in, and I see that people are in that. What's the difference between choosing to go ahead with that and people's experience in that? Or choosing to do something else and being responsive to the moment?"

Well, there's an ego component to that. Which is like, "I worked on this and I want to do it." So can we put that down? Can we have the confidence to know that we have more than what we need? There will be another time for that beautiful *iyyun* and I learned something by writing it, thinking about it. I'm

saying it like it's easy. It's not at all that I don't struggle with this stuff all the time. But I do think that my orientation from songleading, from my parents, and now deeply in the work that I do traveling through the Jewish community, is about, I think it's a Rumi thing, of does it improve upon the silence? There's so much noise, there's endless opportunities for that. A service or a worship experience or anything is just a microcosm of that. We could all say something beautiful probably about every prayer, and I could repeat my song nine times. But where are we making room and holding back? And I do think about that a lot.

Rabbi Hirsch: Yeah, and what you said about that piece of ego, obviously it takes a little bit of ego to stand up in front of a room and to lead. And at the same time, I think this songleading orientation is about knowing that ultimately, about what does the group need?

Elana: Right. So because I'm standing up in front of a group, so I have a view that nobody else has, which I can see everybody, and I can hear everybody, I think there's a lot of responsibility that comes with that.

Rabbi Hirsch: I wonder, as we've been talking about this power of communal singing, is there a song that really captures that for you, of you think you want to bring a community together? You've got a room and maybe it's people who are like, "We're not singers." Just the song that's going to bring everyone together to capture the essence of what we've been talking about, the power of voices going together?

Elana: It's a good question. I think it always matters a lot who the people are in that room. One of the things that I find in my specific work, a lot of times when I'm going places with the absolute best intentions, the leaders of the community will say to me in our planning, "We really just want you to do what you do." I'm asking questions, "So what's a normal service? And I want to see old outlines, so there can be a balance of what's comfortable and what's new." They're saying like, "No, no, no, just come and do Elana." I really don't believe in that. So I'm often kind of doing a little tug of war about how much of my music, how much of what's regular for them.

I'm super privileged that a lot of my music is regular for people now. So some of it's not brand new, and that's their thing that they normally sing, but there's a lot of people who want a little more of that. One of the things that I'm really aware of is what are those kind of comfort food pieces that even in a community where the clergy is saying to me, "No, do 12 of your melodies, and we don't need to do anything normal," everyone will sing and everyone will know, and the generations across." And one of them is just Nurit Hirsch, Oseh Shalom, "A trad," in quotes.

[song performance]

Elana: You could be in pre-K in Chicago, in the preschool, or you could be 85 from a totally different place, I think that there's some melodies in the Reform Jewish world that I grew up in, where they still transcend generation, and that's one of them. If I'm feeling like, "Oh, I've gone a little too far with this group in terms of new," everyone feels good knowing that, and getting in there. So that's one of the ones that I think of for that.

Rabbi Hirsch: I'd love to talk a little bit about Esther, who is the inspiration for our podcast. All season long guests have been sharing powerful moments, Esther's become the queen and her people are at risk, and really their lives are at stake. She is in this position as queen where she can do something about that. I've been thinking about it a little bit over the course of this season. I don't think that she woke up one morning 10 years before she was queen, and thought, "One day I'm going to be queen of Persia, so that if, when the Jewish people are threatened, I'm going to be in the right place at the right time to respond." I think it unfolded, and she was there in that moment. She was there and she stepped up. So I'm wondering if there is a moment for you like that, a Just For This-moment for you.

Elana: We are in a moment in our Jewish life, and in our broader culture, of enormous fracture, enormous isolation, infinite quantities of information to make us hopeless, and feel helpless in making the world better, way more ways to be apart from each other than to be connected to each other. I'm suddenly feeling old enough that I can think back to my childhood, and what was really different in our culture then. So there's a piece of me that just feels about that, about my work and my place in this world, that way, that it is starting to be quite counter-cultural to go into communities with the express purpose of helping people connect to each other by singing. Yeah, my actual job, I think, is thematically aligned with your question about Esther. And the idea that this time in history, this time for the Jewish people, this time for our country, this time for endless number of categories, it's really not normal to make your way trying to get people to feel more connected to each other, trying to get people to sing together, trying to get people to feel connected to faith, or their own ancestors.

I mean, it's stacked against us now in a way that I don't think it was when I was a kid. So I do feel like I bring something to this moment that is specific. I do have something internal that makes people feel comfortable participating when they don't, in their brain, want to participate. To have people come out to a community where I'm visiting, and have some connection that feels sacred, or important Jewishly, and feel like that's a valid expression in today's world, feels meaningful to me.

Rabbi Hirsch: I have a song of yours that comes to mind-

Elana: Sure.

Rabbi Hirsch: ... that I think captures the essence of a Just For This-moment, and what you were just describing, which is I Have A Voice, and I was wondering if you would do that for us?

Elana: I'd love to.

Rabbi Hirsch: I love that song, Elana, because I think it really, the way that you wrote it speaks to the individual in the community. You wrote it in the first person, "I have a voice, my voice is powerful." So it emphasizes what the individual can do. Everyone wants to jump in and sing it. I think that's also really so much the message of this podcast as well too, is highlighting people's individual moments, but then the power of them doing that together.

Elana: Totally. I really appreciate that perspective on it. My experience writing the song, was I was going to spend a week as an artist-in-residence at URJ Kutz Camp where I grew up, in their final summer open with teens. I was confused and sad about the camp closing, because it was so important to my personal journey. I thought, "Well, maybe I'll go to camp and I'll understand, because maybe kids are not, this is not for them anymore." When I was a kid, it's like a leadership place to cultivate leaders who are interested in activism, and interested in advocacy, and whatever, all that stuff. I thought maybe kids today don't want that. Then I went and met these kids and I was blown away. I mean, I'm sure you've had so many experiences in your work of seeing what 14 and 15-year-olds are like right now. They know so much about the world. I mean, obviously too much in certain ways, and too little in other ways, but they care deeply about issues. They are ready to get into it.

I wasn't particularly a troublemaker as a teenager, but I don't really feel like I cared so much about the world outside of my little circle of friends, and what was happening in our little world. I was just so blown away by the way that these young people were holding themselves in the world. So I wrote the song for those teens that summer, which was 2019. It was cool to see, like you said, people sing this song, they jump into it, and it does have that first person-thing, but the sound of a hundred people singing it or a thousand people singing it, is a collective experience. There's also one other thing of the individual voice in the context of the collective, which is in the bridge, there's a little line of Hebrew from the morning blessings, Daily Miracles, which is in the text that I'm used to seeing…Like, "Blessed are you God, who makes me in the image of God."

In the song I am change the conjugation to be in the plural, "We," *She'asanu*. The idea that each of us using our voice, this divine attribute, that when we really use it to connect and to advocate, or to raise awareness on an issue, or stand up for someone who doesn't have power, whatever, that you're engaging with that most divine part of yourself, and the feeling of like, "Blessed are we. What a blessing, all of us together to have that divinity in a collective way?" So that's why you'll hear *she'asanu*.

[song performance]

Rabbi Hirsch: Hearing that song, whether it's one person singing it, two people, a thousand people, it really, it brings people together. So thank you for the gift of that song.

Elana: Thank you so much.

Rabbi Hirsch: We talked a little bit about your parents, and the musical culture that they set up for you, and there were also other musicians, women, men who came before you and set the path. And I'm wondering if there's anyone who you think about their music inspires you, and bring it into this moment?

Elana: Totally. There are so many people that I would list in that. I have a privileged direct line to Debbie Friedman who was a close friend of my family's. Aside from the trailblazing, and the glass ceiling-breaking, and the revolutionary work that she did, that was transformative in the way that our movement and the broader Jewish world connects musically, and to prayer and to each other aside from all of that, that I think a lot of us can draw a lot of inspiration from, and see a line from her path to ours. I really do credit Debbie with this side of me, the potential side in me to contribute in this very specific and strange way to the world.

She's always the person that comes to mind immediately when I talk about music and artists that really came before and really paved that. Then I have so many colleagues and friends now in the intervening years between Debbie and me, that just continuously inspire and help me to think differently about what I'm doing and how I'm approaching it, and ask myself different kinds of questions. It's a wonderful thing to be part of a creative community, because you can experiment and learn from what all your friends are doing.

Rabbi Hirsch: Elana, this has been an absolutely wonderful conversation, to get to sit together, to sing together, to think about these big ideas together. Is there anything else that you want to sing to us before we wrap up our time together?

Elana: So I'd love to share a newer song that was a commissioned piece for a wonderful community in Rochester, Temple B'rith Kodesh. Last fall they asked me about writing a piece for their community's 175th anniversary. With this assignment, I was pointed to this little piece of Talmud…"All of Israel is responsible for one another." For those of you who have looked at a page of Talmud before, there's a lot of ways to interpret this. Lots of people did, and have, and do. There's even different ways to pronounce it.

The basic idea, "All of us," the broadest interpretation, "All of us are responsible for one another." The narrowest interpretation, "All of Israel," the place, maybe, "Is responsible for one another." Or, "All of the people of Israel are responsible for ..." And on and on. You can extrapolate in or out. But the idea that there's this symbiosis, and this interdependence and interweaving. For a community

like Temple B'rith Kodesh, the idea that they've been this way for so long because of relying on each other, and showing up for each other and being responsible for one another.

So I handed it in, and then of course the next day was October 7th. That message like…"We're all responsible for one another," it works now, and it was really fresh. I mean, if you can put yourself into that head space. So they brought it to the community, and I think it's been meaningful to have that for them. For me, it's been meaningful to experience that thing that happens with art, which is like you make it in one time, and then it exists, and then you figure out how it fits other places and other times.

Rabbi Hirsch: I'm your host Rabbi Liz Hirsch. Thank you for listening to Just For This, and thank you for joining us for our first season. 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. All other music in this episode is courtesy of Elana Arian. Thanks for listening to season one. We'll be back soon for season two, and we'll have more Just For This-moments next time.