

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([00:01](#)):

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 CEO 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 Julia Jassey.

([00:56](#)):

Last spring, college campuses around North America were in the news and on many of our minds. Hardly a day passed without a top headline from a college or university. As student protests and heated interactions over the war in Israel and Gaza dominated conversation and debate, it was a difficult and challenging time to be a college student from across all political backgrounds, ideologies, or faiths. And for the majority of students, they agreed on one thing. They wanted to be there to learn, to socialize, and to have a normal experience. For a collection of class years so impacted by the COVID pandemic, this was one more way that their emergent adulthood was anything but normal. With students returning to campus this fall, I wanted to speak with a leader closely in touch with the students themselves. Often I saw, I wonder if you noticed this too, that the media or organizational leaders spoke about students last spring rather than with them, speaking for them rather than centering their own stories.

([02:12](#)):

Julia Jassey, a 2023 graduate of the University of Chicago, founded Jewish on Campus as an undergrad. She has served as the organization's CEO. She heads a staff from around the world as they respond to growing levels of antisemitism on college campuses. Julia and I discussed a community organizing maxim that drives us both. Nothing about us, without us. Jewish on Campus has a mission to amplify the voices of Jewish students, strengthen Jewish identity, and combat hate to secure the future of the Jewish people, while directly connecting with and representing Jewish students themselves. The staff and leaders of Jewish on Campus are current undergraduates or recent grads. They lead for, from, by, and within. During my own years as a college student, the Jewish community was a source of strength, connection, and productive challenge for me. I attended interdenominational Shabbat dinners, I organized interfaith torah studies, and I mediated among students with a variety of personal and political beliefs.

([03:24](#)):

Whether supported by peers, staff, faculty, or alumni, here's what was always true for me. As a Jewish student on campus, I was not alone. This is the overriding message and impact of Jassey's work and the work of Jewish on Campus. Jewish students impacted by antisemitism, much of it preceding October 7th, although it is certainly intensified in the past year. These students are not alone. Emerging from one of the most isolating eras of modern life, these students who took classes on computers and quarantined away from quads, they need to know more than ever that they are not alone. In moments when it might seem risky to be publicly Jewish, this is the work of Jassey and other advocates -- to support, defend, and empower students, so they can know that they are not alone. Beyond her current work, her and I reflected on the power of Queen Esther's example as a woman who leads and speaks out in a male-led society.

([04:32](#)):

As women and CEOs, both Jassy and I have often thankfully felt welcomed and supported often by women and other leaders who came before us. This is one way we can pave the way for the next

generation to boldly establish new initiatives and take the helm of legacy organizations. While the path we walk as leaders may feel lonely at times, the more we connect, cheer each other on, and celebrate each other, the more we know it, we are not alone. We began our conversation with me asking Julia to share more about how she began this organization and her work.

Julia Jassey ([05:12](#)):

I started this organization when I was going into my sophomore year at the University of Chicago. I graduated a year and a half ago, a year ago, and I've been working on this full-time. The goal of the organization, the goal of the work that I do is to really bring together what we are viewing as the next generation of Jewish leadership. Antisemitism has grown to really frightening levels in Gen Z on campus, online, and while it's grown, so is the resiliency of young Jews who are looking for an opportunity to become leaders, to become voices for their own communities, and to say things might be scary, things might be difficult, that we also have the tools, the knowledge, the resources, and the empowerment to rise to the occasion. So the work that I do really is about galvanizing that. How can we make sure that we are creating a generation of leaders who is starting their leadership journey today, is not waiting 20 years to become the next generation, but is actually a generation now that is leading, and setting ourselves up for looking forward how we can have that strength continue to grow, and have this new up and coming group of Jewish leaders really prepared to take on these challenges and to become voices for our community.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([06:21](#)):

It's amazing. And yet you were the one who had the idea to bring this forward, to make this happen, and that's a testament to your leadership and the leadership journey that you've been on. I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about your path, your story, and what led you to want to start Jewish on Campus.

Julia Jassey ([06:43](#)):

I grew up what you would traditionally call a "high holiday Jew" on Long Island. My family background is always something I been really important to me. I come from an interesting, I guess kind of eclectic Jewish family background. My father's family is what you'd think of as a typical American Jewish family. Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe who came here before the Holocaust looking for a better life. And my mom's family is a little bit more unconventional. My mom's family are all from Israel originally, and they, before Israel were from Iraq, Yemen and Spain. So three countries where for quite a bit of time, Jews had a very hard time living there. And for my family, very, very, very acutely aware that because they had a place to go because Israel was a place where they could be, that's why my family was able to survive. So that was really integral to my identity growing up and my relationship with Judaism growing up.

([07:34](#)):

But I also very much took it for granted, as I think a lot of Jews do when they grow up in an area where they feel surrounded by community, it's very easy to forget how much of a privilege that is because we are a really small part of the global population. And when you leave that bubble, it becomes very clear. When I got to college, I went to the University of Chicago, I found myself being the only Jewish person in the room for the first time. And it was something that I just had never experienced before and not something that I think I was prepared to confront antisemitism head on because I had never had to. And I recognize the privilege of that now, but at the time I didn't fully understand that. So I'll never forget kind of my eyeopening story was I decided to join the French club my freshman year in college.

[\(08:23\)](#):

We call them first years at the University of Chicago my freshman year in college. And it's worth noting that I do not speak French, but it was a club with baguettes and free food. And I was a freshman in college, so of course I joined the French club and I was the one non-Francophone there. And one day everyone was speaking in French and I totally didn't understand a word that they were saying until they said the word Nazi. And I remember interrupting the conversation in English and asking, "Hey, why are you guys talking about Nazis?" And the room was really quiet and I remember saying, my family and my father's family, great grandparents, people passed away in the Holocaust. Why are you guys talking about Nazis right now? And I will never forget, there was a student who was in the class, family was from Germany, and he said, back home in Germany, we don't say that your family died in the Holocaust, we say they took an extended vacation to Germany and never came home. And I remember the worst part of that story or the part that really stuck with me the most wasn't even what he said. It was everyone in the room did not know how to react. And people felt really awkward obviously. And some people were like awkwardly laughing and I felt really awkward and started awkwardly laughing too. And it was one of those experiences where I hated feeling like I didn't know what to say, and I never wanted to feel that way again. That was kind of what I was left with, the shame of not knowing what to say, not even the anger what was said. And I remember my mom was able to call it antisemitism before I was because I felt embarrassed to be the girl who cried antisemitism. But what I quickly realized was that I was not the only person with stories like this and that so many people were experiencing the same thing on campuses around the country and that we just didn't have an opportunity or a platform to become voices for ourselves.

[\(10:09\)](#):

So JOC initially started, Jewish on Campus, initially started as six college students creating an Instagram page one day at midnight, random summer day. It was during the COVID pandemic. People were looking for community from across disparate spaces. And we created what was at that point, an Instagram page, very simple goals, just sharing your story. And it became really, really popular really, really quickly. And we realized again, the opportunity of having a platform like that is something that we cannot let pass. And so we wanted to do something more. And so we created this nonprofit organization that now is doing the work that it does, but I think it was always responding to needs that we felt so intimately in our own lives and trying to create change based off of those experiences.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([10:57](#)):

Thank you for sharing that. That's a very difficult experience to have had. And I think that something that I'm always really inspired by is when people share their own personal stories because then you find out, actually while this was really personal, painful to me, that I'm not alone. It inspires other people to start sharing their stories. Is that a part of what happened in sort of the early days that people were connecting with each other? Did you start to hear more stories like that?

Julia Jassey ([11:30](#)):

Yeah, exactly. And that was really the intention behind the work that we started to do. I think so many of us, myself included, when that started happening to me, I was totally quiet. I wouldn't tell people where my grandparents were from. I wouldn't fight back. I would be too nervous in that room to say, you're being antisemitic when someone makes a terrible joke about the Holocaust to me, because I don't want to be that person and no one wants to be that person. But when I started to see other people using their voices in a way that mattered, I wanted to do the same. And what I've heard from so many people and the comments that I get so often from students around the country is Jewish on

Campus, hearing from other people who had these experiences made me realize that I wasn't alone and decide to speak out about what I was experiencing.

[\(12:18\)](#):

And I think, I mean that's the goal of community, that makes the Jewish community so strong. We're very much a community that is not individual. I mean we are very closely connected. Being Jewish is being a part of a community of, I think community is just at the core of what it means to be Jewish person. And I always say that no one should ever do this sort of work alone if they're going to be someone that is speaking out about prejudice and justice and talking about really challenging subject matter. It's something that you have to do with a team.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([12:51](#)):

I feel that really deeply. There can be individual moments of personal Jewish experience, a personal moment of prayer or something sacred or certainly owning your own story and your own Jewish identity. And at its core, Judaism is about being people and being about a community, and that's both for the positive connections and the way that we feel connected with each other across time and space. And also the fact that when one of us is facing challenges, then we're there to support each other and to connect with each other.

Julia Jassey ([13:28](#)):

Absolutely.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([13:30](#)):

I'm thinking about what you shared about antisemitism and that being sort of a core through line of some of the work and what you're hearing and supporting students as they're facing that on campus. And Esther and her story inspire our podcast of stepping up just for this moment of leadership. You of course have already shared a little bit about stepping up, although I'd love to hear if there's anything else that you're reflecting on that core verse that tells our story, but I'm thinking in particular about antisemitism and Esther can be seen as one of the earliest figures, earliest characters in our history and our story of the Jewish people who faced antisemitism. She hid her Jewish identity for a time period, and then when the moment required it just for this moment, she stood up. And I'm wondering if that's something that you're seeing in your work with students on campus where they're feeling like they have to hide their Jewish identity or feeling like they can be more public about it and how that relates to antisemitism today.

Julia Jassey ([14:36](#)):

It's something that I've experienced, something that I've very clearly understand, and it's something that so many students are sharing not wanting to or not being able to engage with their peers if they're kind of labeled in a certain way. And I think what challenges me the most as I am examining where we are right now, it's really hard to see that conversation, dialogue, disagreement, and learning about other communities. Understanding between conflict is totally excluded. And it's really hard for a lot of Jewish students who are looking to share their perspectives, their identities, their experiences, and engage in those conversations that aren't always easy but are always important. And they're being met with absolute guardrails. I always think of a story that happened at Columbia University before the encampment started, before it really became this focal point of the national conversation where I mean

Jewish students were saying to me that they wanted to engage in dialogue and wanted to engage in difficult conversations and that those conversations are being boycotted and being excluded.

[\(15:41\)](#):

And for them that was almost the most challenging part because to come fully in your entire Jewish identity and to say, this is who I am and I want to talk to you and explain it and find common ground was something that was possible and I have hope for a better future where we can engage in those conversations, but for so many Jewish students right now, that doesn't really exist in a meaningful way. And I think that's really dangerous because that's what makes democracy flourish is being able to have conversations and to be able to engage with people across divides. The more that we continue to say, I'm going to show up, I'm going to be Jewish and a feminist, Jewish and part of the L-G-B-T-Q community, Jewish and a person of color, Jewish and any identity that is existing within Jewish identity as well, the more that we say we're going to keep showing up, the more that we refuse to exclude ourselves from that conversation.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(16:32\)](#):

Yeah, I went to college before October 7th, of course, and I was active in the Jewish community in a variety of ways and had some really wonderful moments of engagement both with the Jewish community on campus, leading in the Jewish community, and also interfaith dialogue and making connections in those communities, and also some really challenging moments as well too. I think that some of the seeds of what we're saying today, and we'll talk more about the past several months and what we're looking toward as students are returning to campus as we continue our conversation, but some of those trends and challenges and the situations that students are facing today existed beforehand. And I think that that to me is really important to emphasize is that it didn't come out of nowhere. And yet on October 7th, so many things changed.

Julia Jassey [\(17:26\)](#):

In the aftermath of the pain and trauma that the Jewish community was facing, it's shocking the rise in antisemitism that was met, and also not surprising. One of the more disturbing things that we've had to wrap our brains around is feminism is a very core part of my life and also Jewish identity is a very core part of my life. And the denial, erasure, justification of sexual violence that occurred on October 7th and since October 7th has been just harrowing to kind of grapple with. The seeds within general society to doubt those stories were so in a long time ago in general for women period, but also we're seeing this pertain to Israeli women before October 7th. I think back to students at SUNY New Paltz, which was a Title IX complaint that we actually filed with those students at the Department of Education long before October 7th. And stories of these two incredible students at SUNY New Paltz, just absolute champions and warriors running back against this, but two students who, one was Israeli and one was not Israeli, but Jewish and expressed Israel the closest to Israel as part of their identity, who were a part of a student group for survivors of sexual violence and survivors of sexual assault.

[\(18:39\)](#):

And both of those two students were removed and publicly shamed for their identities and named and shamed and not allowed to be a part of that group anymore. And this happened two years before October 7th, a couple of years before October 7th, and that was normalized that was happening. It wasn't just them, it was happening on campuses around the country. What became really challenging, and one thing I've spoken with those, they've graduated, but those students about in the aftermath is just they had the finger on the pulse of this before October 7th, and there were the red flags, there were

the warning signs, and I think so many students as an organization, we tried to call this out and bring attention to it, and now it's really struck a community that this is actually essential. These trends that start on campus are spreading beyond and we really need to have a magnifying glass on it because it poses a long-term threat to the community and the stability and the inclusion of Jews in all spaces.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([19:36](#)):

That's a really powerful story and I think one that conveys a couple important messages that these trends, these experiences, these stories predate this intensive period, this October 7th and following period. And also I have been speaking out, the organization that I lead, Women of Reform Judaism, we've been speaking out about sexual violence since October 7th, and also for decades and decades beforehand because this is a core issue to what we care about, what we care about speaking up about, and to our feminism, and to be excluded from those spaces because of our Jewish identity and our Zionism and our connection to Israel is really challenging. And also to feel like those stories are being ignored and denied, particularly relating to Israeli women, to Jewish women, is extremely challenging and it doesn't have to negate others' experiences. It's just about highlighting and validating those experiences that do exist.

Julia Jassey ([20:45](#)):

The conversation about sexual violence period for any woman who experiences it, I think is something that we've come a long way with in the past few years. It's so important that we're able to speak about it as women period because it's something that for a very long time was stepped under the rug in society, and was normal, and was hush hush, and talking about it was stigmatized, and now we can't go back. I mean we have these women who've really bravely told their stories about what they've seen, what they've experienced, discriminating against, or ignoring or delegitimizing a story of a woman because of where she's from, period. Just as a concept, that is something that is not controversial to say is wrong, and there can't be an exception for someone when they're Israeli. I mean, we've come so far in society to be able to normalize even talking about sexual violence. I remember a few years ago that would be a really difficult and taboo subject matter to even give voice to, and we cannot go back to a time where women don't feel safe telling their stories. It is so important for women everywhere that this is called out and that this is rectified, this is fixed. This is no longer allowed to seed into our society and erode the progress that we've made as women, period.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([22:01](#)):

So college campuses overall, and then several specific campuses, specific situations were really in the news in the past several months, and this is the area that you work directly in. I'm wondering if you could tell us more about what you were seeing, what you were experiencing, and what you were doing to support students and to create space for all students to come together and feel like they could show up as their full selves.

Julia Jassey ([22:29](#)):

For us, Jewish students, they're on the front lines. I mean the experts in this conversation are the people who are being firsthand impacted and right now, I wish it weren't the case, but the case is that students are the ones being firsthand impacted, which makes them the unfortunate experts on this situation. And so one thing that we've always believed in from the beginning when we started the organization is the people who are directly impacted should be given the opportunity to lead because there are so many students now who are grappling with these changes that are happening so quickly. I mean, in an age

where social media algorithms are so attuned to controversy because controversy sells, what goes viral are not facts and happy stories. What goes viral are things that make you enraged because you'll click retweet, you'll click repost, and misinformation spreads so much faster than information.

[\(23:25\)](#):

So we see these trends that start on campuses might start at one school and the next thing you know it's spread all over the country, beyond the US even, because we're connected in a way that we had never been ever in history before, which can be a really powerful thing. Being able to share human stories across space to people who would never have heard that human story is really powerful. And also mis- and disinformation is given a platform to just spread like a virus, and it's led to discomfort, unsafe conditions untenable conditions for Jewish students on campus all over the country. For us, we're really trying to do a couple of things. Number one, I mean education is paramount and looking for opportunities to create peer-to-peer education, where students are. And where are students? They're on campus and they're online. So how can we be creating resources on campus for students to teach other students? Because nothing is more relatable than for speaking to someone that you have sitting next to you and you're like Econ 101.

[\(24:24\)](#):

I mean having the person who is telling their story to you, being someone that you know, someone that you are friends with, and someone who you respect as an individual than being able to come fully as every part of your identity. That's a different form of connection. That's a different form of relatability that is so powerful. And it's also important on both ends to give students the confidence to share their story and then to give their peers an opportunity to hear it. That's kind of on the educational level, but also on the advocacy level. There is a lot of effort to do something. The question is what to do, and luckily students have the answer for that. So we've been really engaged. I mean the White House National Strategy to Combat Antisemitism since before October 7th, that's been something we've been really engaged with, really engaged with members of Congress and trying to advocate for these causes that students are speaking for themselves, and saying that they need also really engaged in interfaith inter-community conversations with US, UN and those spaces where we can lend Jewish student perspectives to conversations to really make change. If there are people with a position of impact that they can really make change in the country and they want to actually help students. Listening to them. Listening to Gen Z, listening to the people who are firsthand impacted, is so powerful because it gives the most authentic, honest view of what's happening on campus and can lead to the most impact because students know what the problems are, and working together on the solutions is something that can be led by the people who are experiencing it firsthand.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(25:56\)](#):

I believe so strongly in the organizing principle of nothing about us, without us. And some of the things that I think personally challenged me at different points over the past several months and seeing and reading and hearing stories from campus is what is serving and supporting students and what is being done about students versus what is being done for students and with students.

Julia Jassey [\(26:26\)](#):

That's why Jewish on Campus was started. We saw a need where there are tremendous opportunities for students to be engaged in programming that's built for students has existed long before our time on campus. What our unique value add, the reason why we started, the reason why we're here is because we are creating programming with students, by students, for students. We're never going to say, here's

what you should do. We're going to say, okay, what's going on? What can we do to help? It's really hard to make a nonprofit organization. You learn a lot. We've been here for four years, and it's been growing every day since then. And if we have the resources and the connection and the opportunity to give students the resources and connection and opportunity that they typically won't have as individuals and allow them to be leaders, Jewish students are telling us what's wrong. I mean, there is a way that Gen Z operates that we get it because we're part of Gen Z and we grew up with the understanding and the progress that Gen Z has made, and we need to have advocacy work that keeps up with the times that we're living in. And that's why JOC was created.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([27:34](#)):

Amazing. I was wondering if you have a story that comes to mind from something that happened on campus from a particular campus where you've been working and active in the past several months that helps to paint that picture of the way that you're using that student-fueled advocacy and working together, especially because so many of the stories and what's going on in the news has been kind of refracted through the media.

Julia Jassey ([28:04](#)):

One story that comes to mind initially is something got started before October 7th and has continued after, which I think is really important to show that antisemitism on campus didn't begin on October 8th. There were students a couple of years ago at the University of Vermont who were dealing with really horrific stories of antisemitism, and these students were really nervous to come forward with their stories because they didn't want to be socially ostracized on campus. And one thing that Jewish on Campus does is we understand that. I mean, obviously retaliation for a complaint is never allowed, but we do understand that the social stigma that comes with it can really intimidate students to do it. So a lot of the time, we'll file complaints in our name because it will allow students to feel more comfortable coming forward with their stories, which is what we did. And there were a number of just incredibly brave students at the University of Vermont who told their stories even though they were nervous, even though they were afraid.

([28:57](#)):

And that complaint actually ended up before October 7th being the first Title XI complaint of antisemitism to be resolved by the Biden Administration and was used in the White House National Strategy to Combat Antisemitism as an example of what this complaint system can look like. And we've heard from so many students at the University of Vermont who went into this process skeptical and nervous that anything would actually change, not imagining how it could even be possible for anything to change. And they said that things actually started to change on their campus, that they did feel the opportunity to make a difference.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([29:30](#)):

To do that with the safety and support of working together with you and others who you said filing it in your name and to be able to give them the structure, the sense of security and understanding, and then also to see how that actually has an impact on shaping policy and the impact that's going to have not just immediately for those students, but on the experiences of others.

Julia Jassey ([29:56](#)):



Yeah, absolutely. And that's the goal. I mean, again, it's that community piece, seeing what someone else had the bravery, the guts to do, and being inspired to do it too. That's what community is. That's where we come from here, and that's the goal of the work that we do to always say that you can demand more because you deserve more.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([30:14](#)):

Something else that I wanted to make sure to ask you about, inspired by the story of Esther who inspires our podcast, is this idea that Esther really reached kind of the highest level that both a woman and a Jewish person, even as she was hiding her identity, could reach in her ancient society. And here you are leading a national organization, you hold a CEO title. That's the title that I hold as well too. And we're in this exciting time for women in leadership and Jewish women in leadership, and I'm curious what you have seen and what you've experienced sitting in a seat like that. And also if you feel like there are still barriers or maybe a moment or a story that comes to mind where you feel like you've hit that glass ceiling.

Julia Jassey ([31:08](#)):

We've come so far in society as a community, as Americans, as Jewish people. We've come really far in women having access to positions of leadership, and the volume of people who are given that opportunity is still not where we want to be. I'll say for me, a double challenge is obviously being a woman and also being the youngest person in the room. It's really hard because you are a young woman, and that is something that is really easily minimized or you're serving the goal of like, okay, we brought the young person in. Now we can have the adults talk. I had the opportunity back in December of 2022 to join a round table at the White House, which is the first time that they've done this on antisemitism. And I was a few decades younger than everyone else in the room. And you look at the Jewish community and there are now these new leaders, these really amazing women.

([32:11](#)):

One thing that I found within the Jewish community is Jewish women are rising and lifting others. And that's something that I will never forget. I was in that room, I was really nervous because I had never done anything like that before. And I was now speaking to the most important, most influential people in our country and hoping to make a change. And I'll never forget, I mean those women in the room noticed they could see before they'd ever met me before that I was nervous, that I was looking for support from people who could kind of guide me along the way. And they came right up to me, immediately spoke to me, encouraged me. And I think that's where we are as a community. We're realizing the gaps and we're working together to elevate past them. There are a lot more glass walls to break, and I think we have a generation of women who are ready to break them, and the women that come after us, the daughters, the people who are going to be the next next generation of leaders don't have to think of themselves as women CEOs and will just be CEOs and we'll just be their fully as their entities because it will be normal.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([33:20](#)):

I am your host, Rabbi Liz Hirsch, CEO 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.

