

Rabbi Liz 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 Pamela Schuller.

([00:56](#)):

The biblical book of Esther is decidedly a comedy, and for this reason, it stands out and stands apart. As scholar Adele Berlin explains, the very fact that Esther is part of the Bible, a holy book with religious authority and religious teachings, forces us to make it fit the expectations we have about what the Bible is and what kind of writing it contains. We expect a biblical book to be serious and its message to be congruent with the messages of other biblical books as they have been interpreted by the tradition. Now, there are many serious messages within the comedic medium of the story of Esther. As we've discussed previously, Esther steps up bravely at risk to her own life, to save the Jews of Persia from certain destruction. Esther the Brave and Morderchai the Pious may be archetypes, but they are serious, powerful examples of inspiring Jewish leaders. As Berlin understands it, the book sets out a threat to the Jews so that the Jewish audience can watch with glee and laugh with relief as it is overcome.

([02:08](#)):

The mad and threatening world of the beginning of the story fades into a happy ending. Humor and danger certainly coexist in the Purim story. This tension of joy and threat is both counterintuitive and an essential part of comedy. Sometimes we absolutely cannot laugh at something - at the world around us, at a situation in our own life - and sometimes comedy is exactly what we need. It is the doorway up, out, and through the darkness. In our upside down world, humor might feel like the opposite of what many of us need right now, but like Yom Kippur and Purim, two days both serious and sacred, joyful and profound in their own inverse mirror image ways, comedy can let the light in.

([02:58](#)):

My guest today, Pamela Schuller, is a disability and mental health advocate and a professional standup comedian. We spoke about her teenage years when Pamela had, as she describes it, the worst diagnosed case of Tourette's in the country, a touch of obsessive compulsive disorder, and a whole lot of pent up anger. Now, her stories of growing up in a body she had no control over are engaging, powerful, a little bit, heart-wrenching and unapologetically funny, which you'll certainly hear in our conversation. You may have watched her perform live, which she's done in six countries, almost every state in the US and for more than a hundred thousand kids, teens and adults, or even seen her on the Netflix show, Jewish Matchmaking, among other places. Pamela and I also grew up in the same Jewish denomination and in its youth and summer camp movement, so you'll hear us referring to some acronyms and Hebrew words that defined that formative period for both of us. We began our conversation with her telling us a little bit more about her story and her work.

Pamela Schuller ([04:04](#)):

I essentially combine my years as a comedian and storyteller with my personal experience with Tourette's syndrome and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and a Master's in Advocacy into one thing. I make you laugh, I hopefully make you cry or feel, and feel empowered and inspired and learn a little bit as well.

Rabbi Liz Hirsch ([04:23](#)):

Could you tell us a little bit more about your story and what brought you to this point? Combining all of those pieces, and love to hear a little bit about your Jewish journey as well too.

Pamela Schuller ([04:35](#)):

So my Tourette's used to be super severe. I was out of school for years. I broke my neck from throwing my head back so hard. I used a wheelchair, but more than that, I felt really alone and isolated in the world. I felt, I guess I had internalized this idea that my diagnoses take away from the world, that I was something other people had to work through and that my very presence was a negative. And through a series of unfortunate and incredible events, I got shipped away to what I refer to as weird kid boarding school in Burlington, Vermont, and they were the ones that first figured out that I was struggling emotionally. I had nothing about myself that I loved and they were the ones that put me in standup comedy and improv. And at first, I think if you asked me, I would've said, you know I figured out I was funny and I loved that, but I still hated being different. And it was over time that I realized, my gosh, there's so many great things about my brain and I have Tourette's and OCD and maybe those things add to the way I exist in this world differently. I also share when I do Jewish shows, I share about being kicked out of my synagogue as a kid because my Tourette's was so disruptive and they just didn't know what to do with me. And this was, I mean, I'm in my thirties, so this was before people really knew what Tourette's was, and I think there was a misconception that I wanted to be disruptive. If we're being honest, some of the time I probably did, but a lot of the time it was Tourette's and I went on a whole journey to feel Jewish again, primarily at Jewish summer camp.

Rabbi Liz Hirsch ([06:04](#)):

I want to ask you about a couple things off of that. The first is, do you have an early memory or story of being in those standup and improv classes? 'Cause I love hearing about that, and sort of when did it kind of connect for you that that was something that you loved and was giving you energy and connection?

Pamela Schuller ([06:24](#)):

So the first class of standup and improv... I remember boarding school, I had agreed to try a few things. I had agreed as part of me working off hours of detention - for which I hold the record of the most this boarding school has ever seen, please be impressed - I agreed to try a few different things to see what I connected with, and they put me on a journey to find something I loved about myself. And I remember going to standup and improv and at first I remember thinking, "this is awful, this is not for me." And then they had us kind of write for a little bit and they'd given us some prompts and I wrote a joke about having Tourette's and she then asked people to try their jokes out. And I don't remember deciding to raise my hand. I actually remember deciding not to raise my hand, and I don't think it was Tourette's, I think it was something else. I threw my hand up, maybe tentatively put it up, and I did a joke and the whole room laughed and I did another joke and the whole room laughed. And I remember the teacher saying, "I think we have a comedian on our hands." And the staff came to pick me up and it went from feeling like an outsider in this space to I felt like I had been there for years. I felt like these were my people, my friends, and it clicked and boarding school let me start doing standup. And in Burlington, Vermont, these are bars. So I was a child, I was in ninth grade. I still am so thankful that they were supportive of this because they would hold my hand, walk me into the bar, that was a show, let me on stage for my six to eight minutes and then walk me directly out of there. And it gave me stage time and I remember deciding I was funny. I think it took some time before I really knew what standup could be for

me in my life. In fact, someone recently said, "at what point did you know you could make a living doing this?" And I said, "I still don't know and I've been doing it for years."

Pamela Schuller (live) ([08:17](#)):

New and exciting. I'm actually seeing someone now. I'm seeing someone. Oh my God, stop it. Thank you. Oh my God, thank you. Stop it. Do you guys know when it's new and exciting, you're like, "I'm seeing someone, I'm seeing someone. Do I look like I'm lonely and watching 16 Friends episodes? I'm not, I'm seeing someone." You want to keep saying it because you're so excited, like I'm seeing someone, it's new. I'm watching someone.

Rabbi Liz Hirsch ([08:43](#)):

Our show is based in a verse from the book of Esther and from the Purim story. Esther is the queen, she's Jewish, but she's been hiding her Jewish identity, hiding the thing that makes her different in her community. And then Haman has decided that he's going to kill all the Jewish people, right? Like just like that's the plot direction that happens. Esther is in this position where she's been hiding who she is, so she can't publicly say, "wait, that applies to me" unless she says, "wait, that is me. I am a Jewish person and I would be at risk of my life if this plot goes forward." And her uncle Mordecai comes to her and says, "who knows? Maybe it's just for this moment that you find yourself in a position of leadership." So I love to ask my guests to kind of read yourself into that Esther moment and tell us if you've ever been in that kind of position where you were the person who could do the thing that would make the difference and you were in the right place at the right time.

Pamela Schuller ([09:48](#)):

I think for me it's about disability. I don't know that I've ever been the only one that could do it, you know what I mean? But I think for a long time I didn't identify as having a disability. I identified as having Tourette's. I identified as, well, I think identity is beautiful because it's constantly changing. Throughout my entire childhood, if you said, Pam, what do you want to be when you grow up? What do you want to be in 10 years? I would've said 10 years older. Stop asking me questions like this. And it was in college that I got connected to the disability community and I started accessing accessible resources and adaptive equipment. My Tourette's affects my hands primarily. It's really hard to write and sometimes type, and suddenly this community felt like I was a part of it, and that became transformative and empowering.

([10:41](#)):

And I will never pretend to speak for the disability community. I speak for myself and I've gone a lot of school and a lot of programs to be able to advocate for others. Again, not everyone. I'm doing what I can in that there are some people who will never agree with the word disability. I'm friendly with someone, she's an adult with a disability and she said, "dis is a negative word, so I don't have a disability." And I, I love this idea that like, then that's your language that you connect with. And within the disability world, there are a lot of us who are super connecting to the word and I think owning it, for me, owning the word, owning that I'm a part of the community, gave me my career. It gave me the reason I wake up in the morning, which is my career. But feeling like I'm not advocating for myself anymore, I'm trying to pave the road for the next generation is what makes me work, even when my Tourette's is so severe that I'm in so much pain and discomfort and tired, that all I want to do is close my eyes. That's what keeps me going.

Rabbi Liz Hirsch ([11:44](#)):

Thinking about the impact that you can have on others and the way that you don't know for whom you're making that difference in that moment. And you may never know, right?

Pamela Schuller ([11:55](#)):

And knowing who was before me, learning about the people in the disability world, who have changed the world, who have paved the way, who have, I wouldn't have a career if it wasn't for some of these incredible people who have put the ADA in place and changed laws, and there's a lot of work to be done, but it's really cool to know I'm a small piece of a really big and powerful puzzle.

Rabbi Liz Hirsch ([12:20](#)):

That's amazing. Something else that I was thinking about knowing that we were going to talk today about Purim is that on the Jewish calendar, it's sort of the holiday associated both with comedy and also with theater and drama and performance. There's this tradition in many communities to do a Purim spiel, like a dramatic retelling, but also a humorous retelling of the story and there's costumes involved in Purim. So I would love just to hear, is there an amazing or really funny Purim spiel that you've seen or been in or what would you with your comedian hat on say that communities could do better to make their Purim spiels more awesome?

Pamela Schuller ([13:08](#)):

I get booked in advance for Purim because my show is comedy and storytelling with a message, and for Purim, I do it about, like, we all wear a mask. We all wear a mask, what does this feel like to take that off? But is this wrong to say my favorite Purim spiels are where everything goes wrong. I love middle school plays. My niece invited me to go watch her elementary school play. It was the greatest day of my life. I was rocking back and forth because I loved it so much. Something fell apart on stage and I was like, theater, I love it. And the Purim spiel. Okay, so I grew up at GUCI, and when we do our elective presentations, chug presentations, the middle unit is called Geza. And my favorite thing in life is Geza drama. In fact, when I go on a bad date, I will leave and I'll go "Geza drama." It was so uncomfortable, so awkward. I just have to lean into how awkward that was, Geza drama. And so I love when any Purim spiel feels a little bit like Geza drama or the flip side when it's so well produced, you're like, oh, do you have ex-Broadway people working here? I like it when it's either end of that spectrum.

Rabbi Liz Hirsch ([14:12](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. I love the camp theater mode and just the appreciation of that. And I also love a really good spiel that involves taking a musical and then changing all the words, but making it Purim related. I was wondering also because the thing about Purim is it's this holiday that we celebrate with plays and costumes and silliness and sets falling apart and humor that's intended and humor that's not intended, and it's also a really difficult story where all of the Jewish people are almost killed, and then there's a later part of the book where more bad things happen. So it's a difficult story and I'm wondering how does that relate to some of the work that you do about telling difficult stories through humor?

Pamela Schuller ([15:05](#)):

I've thought a lot about this recently. I'm working on a new one woman show that is dark. It's real dark. It's the darkest thing I've ever done. And I've decided even as a comedian, it's okay to not be funny. It's okay to lean into pain and hurt. It's okay to sit with something and find humor in it as you go. I think the story of Purim wasn't funny for a long time. And so I think there's beauty in processing and finding the humor when you're ready. When I was younger, my dad died. He died on Valentine's Day, quickest way

to ruin the holiday. And for years, that was what I would consider the dark day. I didn't do standup. I was not letting myself get booked. I was sitting alone in my apartment and feeling all the feels.

[\(15:52\)](#):

And one year as the day kind of inched closer, I started writing jokes about it. They're not jokes making light of, they're jokes finding humor in. You know the things said to me throughout the years. And one year I was like, for me, I'm going to go do standup on Valentine's Day. And I did a show and I did dark jokes and I'm sure I ruined some people's nights, I mean, they laughed, but it was dark, and it felt so good and so empowering that I booked three more that same night. I was just texting producer friends and being like, "can I hop on your show? I'm going to ruin some nights." I'm going to ruin some dates, some Valentine's Day dates by talking about my dead dad. But I think that's an example for me. I don't always do standup on that day, but I let the way I feel guide the way.

[\(16:36\)](#):

As a young person, I decided to die by suicide as a kid. And it was boarding school that put me in therapy, got me help, they maybe didn't know the extent of it, but I think they knew. I was really feeling at the bottom, really struggling. And just the feeling of kind of step-by-step, what it felt like to ask for help, to get help, to start to love who I was, to find things that made me feel positive about life and then to actively make the decision to stay. And I did a tour called Pop-Up Magazine where I shared some of that story through apology letters that I was forced to write at boarding school and how they're so funny, but there was often something deeper going on. I think that's a journey I think about as well with taking the mask off and letting people know I needed help.

Rabbi Liz Hirsch [\(17:25\)](#):

Thank you so much for sharing that. And I think that that's exactly what we're talking about, about the way in which you can use your art, your humor, your comedy to share some of the most difficult and challenging things. So thank you for that.

Pamela Schuller [\(17:41\)](#):

And it's still my coping mechanism. Because it's also my career, I'm really careful that I keep things for myself, that there are pieces I've written that I won't share. There are jokes that maybe will never go on stage. There are things that I do as my self-care that are for me, that are art, and then there are things that I do that I hope make other people more seen and valued and laugh and all of that that are for the world that I will share out.

Rabbi Liz Hirsch [\(18:08\)](#):

I resonate with that as someone who likes to write that there are some things that are for me and some things are for the world. And I think that knowing that it's a medium that you're comfortable in means that it's going to have different outcomes in the end, but you have the same starting point, same way of getting through it.

[\(18:27\)](#):

I also wanted to ask you as we've already been talking a bit about Jewish identity, feeling connected to Judaism. Another piece about the Esther story and the Purim story that really interests me is that Esther faces antisemitism, and she's even hiding her Jewish identity, she's not public about it, and, you and many of the other folks that I speak with on this podcast are public people. And when you go out and do standup, you really share a lot of yourself out in the public space. And I'm curious if you have ever felt

like you had to de-emphasize or hide your Jewish identity or how that comes up in the work that you're doing or if you resonate with this?

Pamela Schuller ([19:16](#)):

I think I really connect with this idea that I live in my "and". I have a lot of intersectionality going on, I am Jewish woman with a disability and a mental health challenge, and when I step into a space, even if it's a corporate keynote, I am still stepping into that space as a Jewish woman with a disability and mental health challenge. And so my identity comes with me everywhere.

([19:36](#)):

And, a few years ago I did the show Jewish Matchmaking on Netflix, and that a little bit felt like coming out of, like I was widely sharing, I am Jewish, I am single, I date with a disability. It was scary. And I remember my mom saying, "are you scared? Are you nervous for this?" And I think it was a lot of things. I think it was that, I don't know that coming out is the right phrase, but loudly owning these identities on television, which is intimidating. I remember thinking, like, am I going to have more antisemitism thrown at me? And if I'm being honest, I did, but I am proud of my intersectionality, I'm proud of my identities. And so I guess I'm not sure how to end that sentence. I think that's just part of me, it's how I show up in a space and I think I'm proud of that.

Rabbi Liz Hirsch ([20:32](#)):

Well, I love that, the "and". And also in some ways, right, the sentence doesn't end. Right 'cause if you're doing "and" then the "and" is the connection and says that we're going on to the next step and that it doesn't have a clean end, and we think about how all of our identities you show up with in the world are always true.

Pamela Schuller ([20:51](#)):

And I think it's all things I'm still grappling with. I'm human. So there are times where- this morning. So I am a little bit newly single again, which... I'm fine with, I'm putting a lot into my career, I'm touring a bunch. But I was joking with like what if I was so honest on a dating profile? What if I was like, "sometimes barks, will drive you nuts while you're trying to go to sleep." Like what if I literally, instead of letting it kind of open up like an onion or a flower as someone gets know me, what if I just like, "dead dad, has daddy issues?" And that's a little bit how it felt going on Netflix, by the way, of like I'm putting it all out there, but I'm constantly grappling with what does it look like to own it in a way that feels authentic to me and gives me agency.

Rabbi Liz Hirsch ([21:44](#)):

So another thing about Esther that I think is really interesting, inspiring, but also kind of challenging in this moment is that she becomes queen of all of Persia, but she's living in this ancient patriarchal society where okay, she's queen, but in the end she doesn't have a lot of control or agency over her life to the point that when she wants to go and speak to her husband to the king and wants to seek out an audience, going to do that uninvited actually risks her life. If he decides he's in a bad mood or doesn't want her to be there, then he could sort of do an off with her head type moment. So she does that and that's what leads her to be the hero of the story. But I think about it a lot in terms of women have made it so far in advancing in their careers, in getting to be these upper levels of leadership in all areas. But there are still so many barriers that women face everywhere. It's like all the problems of feminism have

not been solved. And I think a lot about this sort of contrast, this intersection. I'm wondering, have you faced barriers like that?

Pamela Schuller ([23:00](#)):

Yeah, for years when I was doing just typical standup, which I still do, but less often these days, I cannot tell you how many times I was the only female identifying person on a show. I cannot tell you how many times someone has said, "our next comedian is a girl comedian" or "is a female comedian." And I was like, "oh, I actually had no idea that you are announcing my genitalia at the show. Thank you so much." I can't imagine hosting a show and being like "our next comic is a male comedian." Sometimes it's hard to tell if something's going on because I'm a woman because I have a disability.

[\(23:35\)](#):

I share the story of a few years ago, I did an event where I was keynoting. They hired two keynotes, me and a guy. He was doing a half hour, I was doing an hour after him. He was a new speaker. I'd been around for years. They had already even booked me. I was coming back to this community. Again, he did half the amount of time, was first, I was second, he was the new speaker they were giving a chance and they accidentally sent me his invoice and him mine. And he made three times what I made at that event. So I think what happened was we negotiated different numbers, and I negotiate as someone who is always worried that someone's like, "oh, she's asking for too much." Or you know I want to be affordable for Jewish communities. I do the corporate and all those other things, but I don't want to price myself out of doing this because I love it and it is my passion. But in that moment, I just, first of all, I cried. When I opened it, I cried. Thank goodness for my best friends. I called three of my closest people and was like, "can we just talk about this?" And I had to learn some hard to learn lessons. Some of it is it's okay to ask for more. It's okay to have someone say, "oh, we actually don't have that in the budget. Can we work together?" Because sometimes they'll just say yes. But it almost knocked me down. I'm still processing it very obviously because I can't even find the words to use. But it was upsetting and I had to think through like, "did they offer me less? Did I ask for less because I still believe that I'm not worthy of more?" And it was probably all of the above and a lesson that I will take with me the rest of my life and also likely make again and again and again because that's what happens when you work for yourself. But I did a lot of thinking and processing and writing about it and learning what I could from the moment once the sting went away.

Rabbi Liz Hirsch ([25:32](#)):

Yeah, I mean, and I think that there lots of opportunities to learn and to hone skills about negotiation. And I always encourage female identified folks to really do that if they're heading into a conversation like that. And, also the system is so broken. With Women of Reform Judaism, we work a lot on advocating for pay equity and we see it everywhere. And it's good to take on what are the things that I, as individual hoping to show up for myself, can do to make a difference. And also, the system is fundamentally broken.

Pamela Schuller ([26:08](#)):

And I now, thankfully, have this incredible cohort of people with disabilities and women who I will reach out and say, "Hey, I actually, I know you performed at this synagogue last year. Can I ask what you charged?" They do that with me, or an open conversation. "What are your rates these days? What percent does your team take?" I think money and success has been taboo, and I think it's just important to have communities where we take the taboo away and we have open and honest conversations and

cheer each other on. Even when you are kind of in your own team, I tour alone, finding people who are truly on your team and you can be open and honest with is huge.

Rabbi Liz Hirsch ([26:50](#)):

And just being able to have that openness and sharing with each other that reinforces that everyone needs to be paid the same and be paid what they're worth. For sure.

Pamela Schuller ([27:00](#)):

Yeah. And it's okay to try to be a boss and move up the ranks.

Rabbi Liz Hirsch ([27:05](#)):

It's more than okay. It's awesome. Something that I'm doing a lot of work on in WRJ that synagogues are working on, that Jewish communities are working on, is thinking about how we can be as inclusive and as welcoming as possible. And you shared a story at the top about sort of feeling like you did not have that in your synagogue at all. And there are obviously always certain particular people and circumstances and things going on and also it was a different time. And now that we are in this moment where, making sure that everyone feels like they can show up in their full Jewish self and be welcomed in is so much more on the agenda and on the radar of Jewish communities, I'm wondering if there are things that you think that we can do to take something that we talk about a lot and that we care about a lot and move it into something that is actually happening?

Pamela Schuller ([28:06](#)):

An actionable item. There's so many things we can be doing, and I think we have come a long way. I have a career now talking about this and teaching this. And I think years ago it wouldn't have been something we're putting in budgets to bring educator, performer. I often hear Jewish communities use the phrase welcoming the stranger. And I love to remind Jewish communities that often people who feel on the outside are not strangers. They're a part of our community already. We just aren't engaging them and making them feel connected like we're on their team like they belong. Whenever I work with synagogues, I've got little tips and tools, but do you have a committee that's focused on inclusion and belonging with people with disabilities at the table, right? They need to be on the committee. There's nothing for us without us. Are we including it in the curriculum? Are we training our educators in our religious school?

([28:55](#)):

A few years ago, I was speaking at a synagogue at Shabbat, and I often politely turned down the request to sit on the bema so that I can have as much Tourette's I want until I get called forward. And I was sitting in the back of the sanctuary, I'd been on a long flight and I was making little Tourette's noises, and the gentleman in front of me got really frustrated with me. He didn't know I was the speaker, he didn't know I had a disability, and he asked me to step out if I needed to make noises. And he didn't work for the synagogue, he was a congregant, but in that moment I felt officially kicked out of that synagogue. I felt so unwelcomed. And on the flip side, I've been to synagogues where I'm sitting alone because I've never been there before, and I've had three people be like, "are you new here? What's your name? Can I sit with you? Do you want to join my family?" And I can feel the difference. I don't judge congregations because all starting at a different place with where we're at in terms of inclusion and belonging, especially in terms of disability. But I always can check in with myself and know, is this a place where I would want to belong? Is this a place where I would pay dues? Is this a rabbi who I think if I barked in



the service, would somehow work it in or be okay with it? Or would it throw him off or her off or them off? So that's something that I'm aware of. So I think if a community cares, they're going to put the work in, if the board cares and if the clergy care, it's going to trickle through the whole community. Oftentimes when I'm an artist educator on residence, I do a workshop with the board. I do a meeting with the clergy team. I do something for the elementary school, something for the middle school, something for the high school, because I think it's about buy-in from everyone. And once there's buy-in, we can make change.

Rabbi Liz Hirsch ([30:42](#)):

I'm 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 @JustForThisPodcastt. 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.