

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 Anna Kislanski.

([00:56](#)):

In the early hours of October 7th, 2023, we awoke to the unthinkable. Children, parents, grandparents, murdered, raped, attacked and kidnapped. Kibbutzim, Israeli collective communities, utterly destroyed by terrorists, all told 1200 killed, so many wounded, lives disrupted, changed forever. That was exactly one year ago by the secular calendar in the rhythm of Jewish time, this massacre and the beginning of a war that has continued for one year now. It aligned with the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah. Simchat Torah, a day of joy, literally rejoicing in our Torah. Our sacred text a day shattered and changed forever. And today is one year. One year since the attacks on homes, lives, families, communities that will never be the same. One year of war, one year in a long series of years of a conflict that endures and disrupts and destroys and denies both Israelis and Palestinians what we hope for, pray for, fight for, and seek: safety and humanity and peace.

([02:20](#)):

In February, I led a feminist mission to Israel just a few terrible months into the conflict at that point. We bore witness at Kibbutz Kfar Aza. We met with members of Knesset, the Israeli parliament, political leaders. We sat with families who were displaced, had lost loved ones, had brothers, sisters, children, parents being held hostage. We heard from activists and leaders who had not given up and were speaking up and speaking out for their beloveds to come home, for the world not to turn a blind eye to suffering and hatred, for violence to end, for everyone to return home. We met with leaders and members and everyday people connected to the Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism, a unique dynamic and growing collection of congregations and communities with deep ties to the Reform denomination in North America and around the world, yet with its own Israeli-ness and expression of faith.

I have spent time living in Israel for months or a year at a time. I've often attended Shabbat services or been hosted for a meal or holiday dinner by the IMPJ communities in Israel. In January of 2023, I was in Israel for a sabbatical with my family. I attended a havdalah service convened weekly at that point by the IMPJ synagogues and communities that preceded the weekly protests and gatherings about the proposed judicial reforms that would severely limit the rights of women, minorities, and people of all faiths in Israel, that would question and fray the very fabric of Israel's democracy, that would risk the very thing we had gathered there to do: pray with men and women singing together, people playing guitar, concluding Shabbat with modern, egalitarian, inclusive ritual, and then marching into the streets to hold the government to account. All of that changed too on October 7th. From the streets, from our leaders, from our Reform movement, come voices of comfort.

([04:33](#)):

Now each week since October 7th, IMPJ and Reform movement congregations have gathered for a Havdalah ceremony at Hostage Square, offering support and strength for families of hostages in Gaza. When our February mission joined that weekly gathering, which we wish and hope and pray and demand should no longer be needed. But on that Saturday evening in February, I was honored to join in

leading the havdalah Blessings and singing an Israeli song *Ein Li Eretz Acheret*, "I Have No Other Country." The words to declare this is my country, even as someone who lives somewhere else. I have deep ties to this place because of my faith. And the words also say, I have no other country and I will be here to hold her, to account, to prompt her to live up to her highest ideals and values of religious freedom, equality, and justice. Here are the full words to this poetic song.

[\(05:40\)](#):

I have no other country, even if my land is a flame, just one word in Hebrew pierces my veins and my soul. With a painful body, with a hungry heart. Here is my home. I will not be silent just because my country changed her face. I will not give up reminding her and I will sing in her ears until she will open her eyes.

Anna, my guest today leads IMPJ as its CEO, and we talked about what this year has meant for Israelis and for Jewish people around the world and for those connected in Israel and abroad as Reform Jews. Today we remember, mourn, honor, reflect, and recommit to safety and freedom, and for that demand for everyone to come home. We will not be silent.

Anna Kislanski [\(06:42\)](#):

I'm the CEO of the Israeli Reform Movement. I've been in this position for the past three years, and before that I've been in various management and leadership positions. I've been involved in the Israeli Reform movement since my twenties, maybe thirties. So we live in Even Yehuda, which is in the center of Israel. We belong to one of the new Reform congregations that the movement has established in the past decade...

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(07:26\)](#):

Thank you so much. I would love if you could tell us a little bit more about your story, how you came to be involved with the Reform movement in Israel and how you came into this leadership role that you hold.

Anna Kislanski [\(07:41\)](#):

Maybe it won't be shocking, knowing Israelis to learn that I was not born into the Reform movement. I was born in Soviet Russia. My family, we decided to immigrate to Israel in 1974. It was shortly after the Yom Kippur war. I was only two years old and the reason that my parents decided to leave Soviet Russia was because they couldn't lead free life and also they couldn't practice Judaism. So for them, the only way to express their Jewish identity was actually to be able to leave Soviet Russia and to come to Israel also because of the Soviet regime, there was a lot they didn't know. They knew that they were Jews, they've suffered antisemitism, but they didn't know how to celebrate the holidays. And I just learned that one of their family friends held a huppah for them, a Jewish huppah for them in an apartment when they got married.

[\(08:57\)](#):

And apparently it was so out of the ordinary, even for Jews in communist Russia. In those days, they would marry in civil marriage, which is funny because we'll maybe talk about it later. In Israel, there are no civil marriage, but then in Russia there was only civil marriage. And so the fact that they also held was very extraordinary, was very special. Anyway, they moved to Israel, but they didn't know much how to celebrate the high holidays or the holidays in general. So actually me and my two brothers that were born after we made Aliyah, we were the ones who taught them. So on Hanukkah, we would come home

and say, oh, it's time to get, and let's buy a menorah and light the Hanukah candles. My dad had to learn how to read from the Passover haggadah and now we're more than 50 years in Israel, and he still is the person who's leading the Seders in our house.

[\(10:14\)](#):

And it's always with this very heavy Russian accent. And it's not just Hebrew, it's actually Aramaic. But we love hearing him do that because we appreciate the effort, things that for us are effortless. For him, it was very intentional. So that was the atmosphere I grew up in. Pretty secular in Israeli terms, meaning you celebrate the holidays, you learn the Bible, you even take matriculation tests at school, so you really know all the stories, but you don't do much. You don't go to shul. And the shul that you don't go to is the Orthodox shul. I think it was in my twenties. I was working for an organization, I was student and I was facilitating workshops for high school students about their Jewish identity. The name of the organization was called Melitz, the Institute for Jewish Zionist Studies. And just from facilitating those workshops and asking kids and their educators about their Jewish identity, I started asking questions about my own Jewish identity and what does it mean to me to be an Israeli Jew.

[\(11:29\)](#):

I think it was one summer that I was asked by that organization to lead encounters between North American youth, NFTY and Israeli youth. So the first time I met a Reform rabbi, it was with that group. I remember my supervisor told me, you need to greet the rabbi. You need to greet all the Americans as they get off the bus. We were all meeting at this location in kibbutz. I couldn't find the rabbi to greet because in my mind I was expecting to see an orthodox rabbis with long pants and a beard... and I couldn't find him. It was actually a very nice rabbi with Bermuda shorts, teva sandals. And so I realized that there was so much I didn't know. And that particular day after lunch, I heard for the first time the singing of the blessing that you say after the meal, and I never heard that singing before.

[\(12:44\)](#):

And also the Israelis, the other kids, the Israelis in the group, they also heard it for the first time, the Americans were singing with their beautiful voices. The Israelis understood all the words, but they didn't know how to pray. And I said to myself, why? I dunno this prayer. I dunno how to pray. I want this for myself. So I realized that I want more for my Jewish identity. A year later when my husband Arthur and I wanted to get married, we already knew that we didn't want to get married through the Orthodox establishment through the, what is called the chief Rabbi. But we thought Reform Judaism existed only in North America, and actually the DJ that we hired to do the music for our wedding said, who's going to be your rabbi? And I said, I really don't know. And she said, well, there's a really nice reform rabbi in Tel Aviv, it's Meir Azari.

[\(13:43\)](#):

And we met with Meir. We immediately clicked and Meir performed our wedding. Of course, he said, the chuppah that I'm going to perform to you is not recognized by the state of Israel. If you want to be recognized as a married couple by law, you have to go to Cyprus or outside of Israel, get married there, then come back and register in the Ministry of Interior Affairs. So we did that. We went to Cyprus, we got a civil certificate there, and with that certificate, we came back to Israel and we were registered. And the beautiful that Meir held on the beach of Cesarea, unfortunately was not recognized by the state of Israel. But I recognized myself as a Reform Jew ever since. And after a while, I started working as a coordinator for one of the reform movement congregations in Haifa Congregation Or Chadash. Several years later, I went on, I became aha, a Jewish agency emissary to the Union for Reform Judaism.

[\(14:53\)](#):

I was working out of the headquarters of 633 Third Avenue in Manhattan. We lived in Brooklyn and I've been dealing with Israel education and Israel engagement for four years, trying to bring Israel as close as possible to almost 2 million, which is already impossible, but almost 2 million Reform Jews in North America. And I think I learned a lot because it was an experience where we went to camp every summer. I was faculty at URJ Kutz Camp. My daughters went to Eisner and Crane Lake camps. And I learned a lot just from the inspiration, the fact that you are a movement with 850 congregations and 15 summer camps and so much creativity and so much confidence. And with that knowledge and with that understanding, I returned to Israel and I was hired by my previous boss, Rabbi Gilad Kariv, who's now a member of the Knesset and my predecessor, to be the director of congregations at the IMPJ, the Israeli Movement for Reform and progressive Judaism. And I've been in that position, and then I became Deputy Director General. And then when Gilad left to the Knesset, I was privileged to take on his position. I've been very lucky. I use the term shlichut as a mission and I feel that many, many Reform Israelis have a mission to the Israeli society, maybe to the Jewish people. And I think that this position is a shlichut for me, and I'm humbled that I get to serve the Israeli reform movement.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([16:53](#)):

Thank you so much for sharing your story, and a few things are standing out to me first that you share a story that is unique to you. It's your personal journey and also has many elements that I'm sure you've heard in hearing the stories of Israelis coming into being connected into reform Judaism. And also I hear in that elements of why Reform Judaism resonates for people around the world too, right? I grew up also in our camp movement here in North America and seeing those same rabbis showing up at camp, wearing shorts and playing guitar and playing wiffle ball, and then also really teaching Torah and being the leader of the community, that's what helped to set me on my path as well too. So that look and that understanding of there is another way that you can access Jewish leadership and Jewish connection and Jewish community beyond what one might stereotypically or traditionally think about either in Israel or in North America.

([18:03](#)):

And then I also think that something that you mentioned about sort of what initially caused you to start thinking about your Jewish identity is so relevant for this time of the year, for the high Holy Days of you were asking those teenagers, those folks who you were preparing the encounters and the meetings to think about questions of Jewish identity, and that prompted you to start to think about yourself. And I just think that that's so relevant and so interesting for this time of year when we're doing that own process of self-reflection and inner looking during the high holy days, during the chagim, even as we're asking and prompting those questions for other people too.

Anna Kislanski ([18:45](#)):

Right? I totally agree with that perception. I think that also it caught me at this age, which I love in general, when I'm working with young people with a younger generation, people in their twenties, that's when your identity is being shaped in general. So the fact that I've had the opportunity in working in education and just find that I think is unique,

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([19:16](#)):

Thinking about stepping up into leadership, and we've gotten to hear about your path and your story and your way into not just identifying as an Israeli reformed Jew, but also your path into leadership. The frame for our podcast comes from the story of Esther from the moment when she has become queen, but she is hiding her Jewish identity. And no one was there to ask her, how do you feel about being the

Jewish queen? But we can sort of imagine that she felt connected to her identity, but also had been warned not to share it publicly because of the leadership position that she was in as a woman and as a Jew. And then there's a plot against all of the Jews by Haman to kill them all. And she's the one who's in that position who can step up to leadership. And Mordecai comes to her and says, mi yodea, who knows? Maybe it's just for this moment that you find yourself in a position of leadership. I'm curious if there's a moment like that for you, whether it's stepping into the role maybe or a moment that's come up in recent months in such a challenging time in Israel and around the world.

Anna Kislanski ([20:32](#)):

Yeah, I think that this sentence for me, yes, who knows, maybe it is just for this moment that you are, this position of leadership is relevant for me on so many levels. First of all, on the personal level, it wasn't a natural. Once my predecessor Gilad left to the Knesset and I was asked to be an interim executive director, and then they started to search. I didn't think of myself as being the executive director of the movement, even though I was the interim. And really slowly as I've been doing more and more in that position, and also because I was also approached by a few Mordechais right within our movement and people that I appreciate and said, hello, who knows if this is not the right moment for you? It's very typical of women in general that if you don't check all the boxes, then you probably are not the right person for a position.

([21:44](#)):

So on the personal note, I think I needed a few outsiders to tell me to be that more high for me once I've decided, then I applied and I did it right. And so that's one thing. And the other thing is a question that I keep asking myself as a leader in general, I started my position in '21- '22. There was a completely different government, there was a unity government in Israel. We had so many conversations about pluralism talking with the ministry of diaspora affairs, who was then Hai and was a member of the government. And so it seemed like an amazing opportunity for movement who's always in many ways been discriminated because of the Orthodox establishment, to be more on the mainstream and to be more visible. So that was one moment where I thought, wow, this is an opportunity. But then it didn't last long and the new government came into power.

([22:58](#)):

That was December, 2023, November, 2023, and then the legal coop started and our movement said as a movement, I think we said to ourselves, who knows, maybe it is just for this moment that you are in the position of leadership. And we decided to join the protest movement. We were the only Jewish organization to publicly join the protest, not as individuals, but as an organization because it touched us very deeply. A lot of our achievements were because of the high court, and we were really visible. As we approach the moment of October 7th, 2023, the night before October, we went to bed pretty content because we were asked, we were so visible in the protest and the idea of religion and state, the whole conversation of religion and state became dominant. And we were approached by 16 municipalities to hold egalitarian official hakafot, ceremonies for the municipalities...

([24:19](#)):

But to actually lead hakafot in the streets in the public sphere, getting the backing and the resources from local municipalities was pretty unique. Of course, it never happened because we woke up in the morning and it was a terrible morning from 6:30 AM and even until now, it's been different. And so our movement and also my own leadership, we had to show our courage and the way we want to lead and affect what's happening in Israel in a way that is resonating with our values. And so I think there are many other moments for me personally as a woman leader and also for our movement in general.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([25:11](#)):

You already began to speak about it a little bit. So I want to focus, especially knowing that our conversation will be shared on the one year secular anniversary of October 7th, to think a little bit about the events of October 7th, 2023, and then the whole year that has moved forward. And with a Hebrew speaker on with me. One of the things that I've been thinking about as I host a podcast focused on Purim in the fall in the opposite time of year from that is there's actually a beautiful connection between Purim and Yom Kippur that our rabbis and our teachers sometimes call Yom Kippur, Yom Purim, that it's a day that's like Purim, but also opposite at the same time as we come into observing this secular anniversary of ten seven in these holiest and sort of most spiritual days of our year, and then thinking ahead of course to the observances that will happen in Israel throughout the next several weeks and around the world. Just wondering if you could reflect a little bit personally, and then what is meant for the movement these past several months, the year since October 7th, 2023?

Anna Kislanski ([26:31](#)):

It's unbelievable that October 7th is happening during the days of retrospection, the days of cheshbon hanefesh. And I know that we're still in the of the war, and as we speak our north, and not just the north, I mean it's becoming more and more, but Hezbollah is basically sending hundreds and hundreds of rockets. So it's very hard to stop and say, well, let's commemorate. It's a year...So we need to Jewishly remember the lives that were lost and so much that was lost. But this is the time, the time of, and I think that October 7th this year will be a time for, and our movement have decided that actually the official ceremony that we'll hold, there's going to be ceremonies. And throughout the high holidays, there are going to be a lot of reflections. On October 7th in our congregations, and I haven't even started to talk about the congregations of the people who are still displaced, right?

([27:45](#)):

The congregations in the Gaza envelope. And we've decided as a movement to mark this on the eve of October 7th, meaning on the 6th of October, and on the 6th of October is the day of the fast of Gedalia who was murdered during the first temple. And that is a day of fast and retrospection. So on that day, we're actually all, we're taking a large delegation of hundreds of members and leaders from our congregations to the south to the Gaza envelope. We're going to meet with people there, not so much for the places that were affected, because we know the story. We don't necessarily need to visit the ruins of Kibbutz Be'eri again, but to meet with the people who have their own, hear their stories, and also appreciate the fact that they have returned. I mean, many people from the kibbutz team, whoever, there's some ki team that cannot return, but they have returned.

([28:58](#)):

So we're going to do some encounters with them throughout the day. And then in the evening, we will hold a ceremony...where we will have representatives of families of the hostages and some of our leaders from the congregations in the north who will be there with us as well. And of course, we'll be broadcasted on our Facebook page, and this will be our day of retrospection in general. I think that throughout this year, our movement has been trying to do whatever we can to help the displaced people in Israel through our humanitarian aid fund, Keren B'Kavod, through our amazing rabbis, actually, especially women rabbis...

([30:13](#)):

They've all been very, very brave in trying to hold their communities together....So think about the idea of being a leader when you don't have a base, when you don't have your place, your makom to get your energy or just to get some rest. So we've been trying to do whatever we can to support these rabbis and

also to support these broken communities. We also realized that throughout the past decade, our movement have experienced a huge growth. We've more than doubled the amount of Reform congregations in Israel. We were 25 in 2009, and now we're 54. And one of the wisest decisions I think that we've made was to spread to the periphery and to build congregations not just in big centers and in the center of Israel, but actually in the far north and in the south and in the area of the borders.

[\(31:22\)](#):

And so we realized that as soon as possible, we want to continue building and strengthening the periphery by building more congregations in the north and in the south as soon as it's possible. The other thing that we've been trying to work on very hard this year is shared society activities. I think that there was a lot of hostility between Jews and Arabs, especially amongst Jews, towards the Israeli Arab population. There was a lot of suspicion. And so our movement immediately initiated a statement saying that this is no time to become hostile. This is the time we all have a shared destiny together. The Arab public was hurt as much as the Jewish public was hurt within Israel. So we encouraged our congregations to hold shared society programs. We even gave them some mini grants. So that's another thing that I think that October 7th brought us as a movement to the realization that we also want to promote shared society.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(32:35\)](#):

It's so important to be sharing that part of the story, especially for an English speaking audience, folks who might be listening from North America or elsewhere, because I think that it's so easy to look at the headlines, to focus on the war and to say it's an us versus them, them versus them situation. And I have really admired and so respected and make sure to tell folks about the efforts of the Reform movement in particular towards shared society during this most difficult time. Because if we can't do it, then this is the reason that we build those relationships and they're more important than ever.

Anna Kislanski [\(33:18\)](#):

Yeah, I totally agree. And I think it also energizes our congregations. I've heard people say that the fact that we had shared society activities made them even more engaged in our congregations. So we're going to continue with that path as well.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(33:38\)](#):

We hope and we pray in between the time that we speak and when we share this conversation that the situation will have changed and the hostages will be home, and that everyone will be able to live more together in wholeness and peace. We know also as things are escalating in the north and beyond that, the reality is really, really challenging. As you've referred to, one piece that I want to highlight that's important is for people who may be connected in with the Reform Movement in north and beyond, but not have immediate family or connections in Israel. For me, the Reform Movement is our family in Israel, and there are Reform Jews, Israeli Reform Jews who have been directly impacted by the violence on October 7th, whose families and homes were attacked living in those congregations and who have loved ones who were taken hostage and who were still hoping and praying for their return.

[\(34:42\)](#):

And October 7th is such a complicated day because it's one where we're mourning those who were lost, but also still hoping and praying for those who are hostage to come home. So I'm wondering if you could speak to what the IMPJ has been doing in Tel Aviv and throughout the country also too, in Hostage Square, and just supporting those families because it relates back to what we were talking about, about

religion in the public sphere and also the way that the Reform movement has uniquely showed up. I had the opportunity to be there with you in February, but we don't want to keep having that gathering. But at the same time, I think it's important for folks to know who haven't experienced it, what's happening, and then what the Reform movement is doing because it's such an important piece of both public protest, but also offering comfort and support.

Anna Kislanski ([35:39](#)):

First of all, I remember Liz, I was with you there and it was extraordinarily moving. Hearing you sing, I have no other country as an Israeli hearing it from a Jew who's from outside of Israel, but obviously you have your own unique connection to Israel was really brought tears to my eyes, and I'm sure I wasn't the only person who experienced that. So thank you for showing up and for being there with us. As a Jewish movement, as a religious movement we truly believe the saying that there is no greater mitzvah than the release of the captives, as the Rambam said, and we need to put our action where our mouth is. So putting things into action, meaning advocating for the release of the hostages as much as possible. We're showing up. We're showing up every Saturday night, both in Jerusalem and in Tel Aviv.

[\(36:54\)](#):

First of all, for the rally, for the release of the hostages, but before the rally, both in Jerusalem and in Tel Aviv, we offer some spiritual solace through. I have the last service that we've been holding every Saturday. The Havdalah service in Tel Aviv is being broadcasted on Facebook so that people that aren't able to join us, or if they're abroad, they know that they can find us. It's usually around 7:00 PM It depends on the time of year, right? But it's usually around 7:00 PM Israel time on Saturday. The fact that we're there for the Israeli public is something that we feel that we need to do. I think we're a place where people can rest their spirits.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([37:55](#)):

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 @justforthispodcast. You can also follow Women of Reformed Judaism @WRJ1913. Our show is produced by Sheer and Shim, LLC. Special thanks to Lisa Pinkus Hamroff, Aly Rubin, Rabbi Neil Hirsch, Lior and Mikah. Jen King designed our logo, and Eric Shimeloni wrote our theme music. Thanks for listening. We'll have more just for this moments next time.