

## Just For This: Season 2, Episode 6

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 Cara Greenstein.

([00:57](#)):

As we move through the High holidays, we are in a period of renewal, introspection, and many, many holidays. During the Jewish month of tishrei, we have more holidays and observances than we can sometimes keep track of: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, Simchat Torah. Holidays mark off time as sacred, separate, distinct and holy, and holidays are also times that we gather together. For many, the height of the COVID pandemic was the opposite of this inclination. People did gather using technology to keep us connected on Zoom by laptops and calling loved ones on the phone. Many people experienced the heights of loneliness and isolation, so counter to this typical celebration of these sacred days of gathering in prayer and community, even as technology did help us stay together when there was no other way to do so. My guest this week, Cara Greenstein, is a weaver of community online and also engages deeply with her Jewish community in Memphis. We speak about her Jewish path and her broader work, how she shows up as a professional, a mom, a media presence, and a Jew. She's the creator of the popular Caramelized blog, brand, and online community. We spoke about relationships and the power of connecting both online and in person. We began our conversation with me asking her to introduce herself and share a little bit about her journey.

Cara Greenstein ([02:34](#)):

I am from Memphis, Tennessee, proud, born and raised. Memphians is what we call ourselves. And now I am living here raising my own family. I'm a mom of 2 under 2 and I work in strategic communications and public relations here on behalf of companies that are in both the nonprofit and for-profit sectors. And I also own a food and lifestyle blog now brand called Caramelized, hence the play on word of Cara. And I founded it over a decade ago, and now it's operating more in the content creation, social media, influencer space, which is a whole experiment in itself. And then I'm a very active lay leader in my Jewish community here in Memphis. And every extra hour I can find, I really hope to continue pouring into our community here. It means so much to me and gave so much to me.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([03:34](#)):

It's wonderful to have you on the show, and I would love it if you could just tell us a little bit more about your story, your upbringing, and what led you to stay engaged, be a part of your Jewish community, and what took you on your professional path as well, too, how you came into the roles that you're holding.

Cara Greenstein ([03:54](#)):

I am the daughter of a rabbi. I am a proud product of a Reform rabbi who started his rabbinate in Memphis the year before I was born. So I'm now 32 years old. He is still senior rabbi of Temple Israel today, which is a 170 year-old Reform congregation and for Tennessee and the South, that holds a lot of historical value that I'm excited to carry on. And so with that being such a core of my childhood and identity, I've just been honestly very surrounded by the Jewish world from an early age. It's been a very natural part of my life all the way through. I am also the product of this region's Reform Jewish summer

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camp, Henry S Jacobs Camp where I met my husband ,went on staff as the songleader in college, and he, my husband Alex, is from Little Rock. So again, deep south Jewish roots and family ties to this place over those years of being raised in the reform Jewish movement, being involved in youth group, NFTY, songleading, and BBYO as well.

[\(05:11\)](#):

I took that with me to University of Texas at Austin, which I selected because I wanted a large community that had a large Jewish population as well. I chose to study public relations quite honestly because my parents, who I value their advice, said, Cara, you are very good with people and you love to write and telling stories seems to be natural for you. So I started studying pr and that is what I technically practiced today though obviously through the world of social media, it has taken many forms and platforms. But with that, it has been such a fabric of my life, this idea of narrative and storytelling. And it's actually why my blog was founded too. It was technically a college class project. Now, I guess today with my roles being plural, Judaism and storytelling really are those key factors that continue to carry me into this world.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(06:15\)](#):

So wonderful to hear all of that. Judaism and storytelling are also kind of really integrated and connected to each other, so that's really beautiful. And I love also hearing about different people's paths and upbringing through the Jewish world. I met my husband at Reform Jewish camp also too as adults when we were both working there on staff. And I'm also a songleader, so I love that we haven't met each other before, but share those pieces about how we came to the point that we're at as well too.

Cara Greenstein [\(06:48\)](#):

No, absolutely. And it's funny because I think I actually learned guitar because of camp and because of my counselor being a song leader. And so I don't play my guitar very often beyond these Jewish settings. And now I've been so busy lately that while at Temple Israel, I used to do it more often. My guitar has been in my attic for too many years and my now 18 month old, he's so into music. And I actually pulled out my guitar last weekend for the first time, ooh, goosebump moment that he's strumming and we're singing and it's really sweet.

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

It's so amazing and guitar's incredible at any age. I also primarily play guitar through songleading and connecting into the Jewish community. But the other week I was getting ready to go do some Shabbat singing at my kid's school and just took my guitar out and I was like looked at the time and it had been an hour later of just playing through favorites for myself. So it is nice to remember that it's something that you can offer out to the community, but also something that's personally meaningful and enriching as well too when we're such in the go mode.

Cara Greenstein [\(08:01\)](#):

Oh yeah, absolutely.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(08:04\)](#):

I would love to hear, as someone who focuses on community and family and the things that you share out on your blog and on your platform, do you have a favorite Jewish holiday or a tradition or a food as

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we're coming into this fall holiday time of year, something that you love to share either with your family or even more broadly?

Cara Greenstein ([08:29](#)):

This New Year theme and the seasonality of it is such a natural creative anchor for me right now because with Caramelized, which isn't just for a Jewish audience, a lot of the food and entertaining content that I'm creating is based on the season. And I think that while a holiday like Passover, yes, there are spring food rituals, but the food is very directly tied to the story that we're reading for the holiday. Whereas Rosh Hashanah and the Harvest and Sukkot, I just love it. It is a universally felt season that for us just selfishly has much more meaning being a new year. So I love making the recipes and setting the table tying in apples and that multisensory feeling of this season that we're entering. And I am excited that literally yesterday, my son Hudson is at our Temple's preschool, and the theme of the week for them is Apples, and he is only speaking maybe 10 words right now, but he came home yesterday saying Apple because they're learning, they're stamping art with a halved apple and eating apple sauce, and it was just really sweet. So I will say that in terms of tradition, food is so central to what I do and think about and create, but now that I can create traditions with my kids as they get a little older, for now, it's just all nice to see it come full circle and also be something that a wider audience on Instagram, for example, can appreciate too.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([10:11](#)):

Yeah, there's a lot of Apple content right now, whether you're at a Jewish preschool or you're just someone who is part of the season. So that's really interesting to think about how since a lot of the content that you create is for a broader audience, that there are some things that are more particularly Jewish, but there are some things that can also be more universally relatable as well, too.

Cara Greenstein ([10:36](#)):

Totally. And I love the round Challah. For example, during Covid, I came up with, do you know what Monkey Bread is?

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([10:45](#)):

Oh, yeah. That pulls apart

Cara Greenstein ([10:47](#)):

Exactly. So I took a bunt cake and I made challah dough, and then I actually just created little hollow balls and baked them in that monkey bread shape and baking style, and then I poured a cinnamon honey glaze on it. And to me, it's like my elevated challah, but to the everyday person, they're like, this brioche cinnamon situation is delicious. So it's just a fun way to adapt Jewish tradition, I think to something broader too.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([11:22](#)):

Yeah, I have long followed Smitten Kitchen and her blog, and I think something that she does really well is she's connected into her Jewish identity and makes a lot of a traditional Jewish recipes, but integrates them in and puts her own twist on it as well too. So I've always appreciated that.

Cara Greenstein ([11:39](#)):

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I love Smitten Kitchen. She's one of the originals when I think of bloggers that now the term blogger makes me sound so antiquated, but that was the bread and butter of it at one point.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([11:51](#)):

Yeah, I am not a baker or someone who really excels or loves to cook or find my passion in that, I picked up some cookie dough that I can make with my kids over the weekend that's already all set. And you talked a little bit about your growing up with some music and camp and Jewish community and all of those pieces. Have you always been into baking and cooking? Has that been something for you? Is there someone who you learned that from or just always been interested in it?

Cara Greenstein ([12:21](#)):

I have always loved to cook, and it's funny because my mom does not enjoy it, but she valued family dinner every night that she could, my dad being so busy, he would only be able to sweep in for 15 minutes, but we would still sit down and eat dinner. So it was very much, it was a valued part of our day, but it was a task for her to figure out what to feed us. And when I was a kid with the babysitter on Saturday night, I wanted to watch Food Network instead of Nickelodeon and Disney. I loved the original Emeril Lagasse and Rachel Ray and Bobby Flay and all of those Food Network celebrities when I was, I don't know how old at the time. And so that is how I watched and learn and was interested in cooking. And when I had my bat mitzvah, this is the best part that I forgot about until now, I asked for gift certificates to Williams Sonoma as a 12-year-old because my parents didn't have all the cool gadgets I saw on tv, and I wanted a KitchenAid, I wanted a cool chef's knife. I wanted the unnecessary rice cooker or ice cream maker. And so my parents laugh because they're like, great, we get to stock our kitchen with these amazing appliances thanks to our daughter's bat mitzvah.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([13:52](#)):

That's so fun and also so cool that you knew that from a young age and had that interest.

Cara Greenstein ([13:58](#)):

Yeah, so I've always loved to cook. I don't have as much time too anymore, but I still value the idea of a meal. I'm always thinking about my next meal.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([14:08](#)):

So thinking about saying that you're so connected into the Jewish community and your Jewish identity and that your blog and your social presence and the other things that you're putting out into the world publicly are for a broader audience. I'm curious if you have thought about or run into a moment or have a story to share about your Jewish identity meeting, your work and how you feel about being Jewish in a public space, if you feel like you show up Jewishly when you're in your public presence and how that's interacted and related for you.

Cara Greenstein ([14:45](#)):

It's really interesting being here in Memphis because there are only 9,000 Jews in our 1 million population, but we as a Jewish community are so integrated with the greater community of Memphis that my identity as a rabbi's daughter always stuck with me, and it was in a positive light. And the joke was when I made the choice to move back to Memphis and chart my own path in terms of my career and planning new route, I always assumed that rabbi's daughter would follow me. But it's interesting

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when you're in a professional setting or in a social media digital setting, and people don't always associate me with my dad at first impression. So it was this aha moment for me, I would say a couple years into my career when I realized, oh, I have to make this known myself. This isn't just a title that I'm inheriting and just indirectly carrying.

[\(15:46\)](#):

So for those who I grew up with or those who saw me from a young age, yes, it's obvious, but it's not as obvious to others. So I'm very proud to claim that title and claim my Judaism, but frankly, it's in a, I hope, a much more relatable, relevant way for the everyday person. I don't have time right now to go to Friday night services every week, but I do make Shabbat with my family. I don't necessarily keep kosher. I admittedly definitely don't keep kosher in my recipes. You'll see. But the idea of Jewish customs and holidays and food is very much core to what I'm putting out there. And then here in my professional work, as I said, with the way our community is, I'm very cognizant of almost representing our Jewish community. Even if I'm not working for a temple, I want to be an ambassador for it. So again, not putting in people's faces, but it is very much core to my identity.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(16:52\)](#):

Yeah, you feel that sense of, you understand that you are out there publicly and you want to represent that and feel that positive connection to it. I also think something that's always been so important to me and that's so powerful is just to sort of say, people who are connected into their Jewish identity Jewish community are regular people living regular lives and not sort of some painted stereotype off over here. And to expand how people would define living in a modern Jewish family looks like today.

Cara Greenstein [\(17:28\)](#):

Absolutely.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(17:30\)](#):

Have you ever run into any kind of antisemitism?

Cara Greenstein [\(17:35\)](#):

It's very interesting because I'll be honest, I think because I was the rabbi's daughter, I almost had this protection here in Memphis that I don't know that had. And because of that, I never experienced it. And I went to a Christian school, I went to an all girls Episcopal school that was very accepting of me as a Jewish girl. It's a very interesting point to reflect on for me personally, because when I see how rampant it is and how many are seeing it or experiencing it, it's hard for me because I feel like, and the same goes for my Instagram audience. My community is so supportive, and I almost feel like my corner of the internet is, I wish the rest of the internet were alike. Because when I post about October 7th, when I post on my stories about what is happening, I am overwhelmed with support, not just from Jews. And it is sad, honestly, because I feel like I'm not experiencing the reality. It's almost like I have this idealistic situation, but it's real for me. That's definitely something I am so grateful for, but I wish others could have that same story.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(19:05\)](#):

That's really amazing. I think that also growing up, that I felt really lucky to not have faced a high level of antisemitism. I think things have shifted, and while it's important to share out people's real stories, real experiences, it's also important to share the stories like yours and the experiences that you've had

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because it's not all one thing. And to not focus only on the really challenging and difficult moments, but to also help people feel that they can feel comfort, can feel safety, and also that not everything is bad all the time, and that's okay, too

Cara Greenstein ([19:44](#)):

True. So true, right? I mean, I'm always a glass half full kind of person, and I definitely don't want to ever shut out what is really happening right in front of us, but especially on social media right now. I think one thing that I've really had to grapple with since last October, I can't believe it'll be a year, the idea that as a media pr, social media professionals, seeing how damaging that media outlets and social media spaces have been for us as a Jewish people and for Israel, the cloud of misinformation and inaccurate or biased coverage and headlines, it's so incomplete and sometimes it's so wrong. And I struggle with it because it's what my responsibility is as a professional, and yet I cannot change what I'm seeing, and I don't want to be the kind of person who just shuts out people who aren't like me or shuts out because somewhat that's contributing to the issue. But at the end of the day, it's like I can't control that other side. So for now, I just have to focus on my Instagram community and my corner of the internet and follow the sources that I know are reporting accurately and just that's all I can do right now. It's really tough.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([21:14](#)):

Yeah, I think that so many of us feel the burden of responsibility of we care, we're connected in, and also there's a way in which it's amazing that community that you've cultivated is so positive and so supportive and that you have that. Do you think that there's anything that you've done in the way that you've set up the content, the community, the presence that you have that's led to that or invited that to be that way?

Cara Greenstein ([21:45](#)):

I think what has been so interesting as an influencer or as an Instagram personality, thousands of people don't know me in person, but they feel like they know me because of how I talk in the camera and how I share my life. And I think because I've been able to authentically humanize share what this past year has been like for me as a mother, as a Jewish mother, as a Jewish person, and I'm able to talk about that in a raw way. I don't overshare, I'm going to be honest. I'm thoughtful with when and how I put my opinion out there because I'm not an expert on the issue and I don't want people to think I am, but I think because I can talk about it in a relevant way, viewers understand it in a more human way. And that has worked well to inform, but also make people recognize that this is absolutely a political geopolitical, very complex situation, but it also is about human beings,

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([22:54](#)):

100%. I think that it's about real people, real stories, and whether that's you sharing yourself and helping people say, this isn't just about some group of people that maybe I don't know or have any connection to. This is about this person who has opened a door and told me her story and let me into her life, or I don't have any immediate, immediate close family in Israel, even though I feel connected to Israel. And in large part that's because of growing up at camp and the Israelis, the mishlachot who came to camp, who became first counselors, and then real friends and real people who I've stayed connected to this day. So when people say, oh, I'm reading the headlines about things that are going on in Israel, then I have real people that I really know who are displaced or have been impacted by the conflict.

([23:52](#)):

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And also similarly have really made an effort to connect and to meet Palestinians and to meet other people who are impacted as well too by the fullness of the conflict. So I think as soon as we get past the us and them and the headlines and the stories and meet real people who are really experiencing that, whether it's here in the States and our own Jewish communities in North America, or people who are having those real experiences, it just takes it to a very different level.

The theme for our podcast is based on the Purim story. We've been talking a little bit about the fall holidays. Those are the ones that we're in the midst of right now. And it comes from that moment in the Purim story where Esther has been hiding her Jewish identity, even though she's become queen, and then suddenly there's a threat against the Jewish people.

[\(24:46\)](#):

And her uncle Mordechai comes to her and says, who knows? Maybe it's just for this moment that you're in the position of leadership. And I love to ask my guests just to think about how they relate to Esther as a character maybe. And for some folks, it is one moment that stands out where you stepped up, and for others it's about her whole character and who she is. I love to ask women who are out there, who are leading, who are being public figures or stepping up in the Jewish community to think about how they connect to Esther as a character.

Cara Greenstein [\(25:22\)](#):

It's really interesting. I am only 32 years old, and I think I have a lot more to experience in my career and in this world, God willing for that moment and how we define the moment. I don't know if there really is one or has been one for me, which I'm admittedly grateful for because I would claim that I've been nurtured in an environment that has really pushed me to lead wherever however I can. And that takes different forms. As you know, best leadership is not just standing on a podium, but it is being listened to and respected and being able to have experiences that lend an expertise for you to provide others. So I would say that leadership has been an evolution for me, and using my voice has been an evolution for me that I definitely don't take lightly. I think that for me right now, it's about how I take advantage of every moment I have or every day, if you want to frame it that way, and how I am going to be thoughtful in how I use my time, how I can provide leadership to a situation in different aspects.

[\(26:40\)](#):

A lot of the time as a PR professional, I'm ghost writing scripts or helping with op-eds or helping shape a narrative that others will read. And that to me is I guess a form of silent leadership, but without being too generalized, it is about how I take advantage of every moment and not take it for granted.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(27:05\)](#):

You mentioned your role that you've stepped up and taken leadership roles in the Jewish community, and also of course, as you were just referring to leading by helping to shape story and message in the professional work that you do. And I think that a story that folks like to tell is that millennials, younger generation are not stepping up into Jewish community or not stepping up into leadership or maybe not even joining congregation synagogues or communities. To that end, I'm curious, especially putting on your social media and that kind of hat, are there ways that you feel like Jewish organizations, synagogues, communities, could be doing better to reach out to people who are primarily connecting with news and community and content through online outreach and through social media and those kind of connections? At first, are there things that you know from your professional work that you think

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people could be doing better or something that you've noticed just from your own experience of being a leader of that generation showing up in those spaces?

Cara Greenstein ([28:16](#)):

It's really hard to generalize us millennials. We are complicated people, but I do know that Jewishly, we are so by default tied to the relational side of who we are as a people. That in essence, I believe is why we are Jewish. It is about the community aspect. Being Jewish alone is probably not very inspiring. So for me, it's like how do you shape community for someone who's planted roots or for someone who's transient or for someone who can't give the time that generations before us gave to a Jewish community? And so for that, it's about meeting people where they are, and that's really hard to do in a one size fits all way. But what has worked really well for our Jewish community is peer to peer. Absolutely. Clergy and staff of these congregations and Jewish organizations are critical, but it really is the peer to peer invitation, engagement, outreach, and programming that to me makes Judaism relevant and meaningful.

([29:38](#)):

So what I have found really amazing here in Memphis is that the most successful programs are the ones that two friends said, Hey, we should do this with 20 other people. And the resources of the congregation and organizations are behind it, but that the same five staff members aren't planning everything for social media. It's very tough. I think Covid allowed us or showed us to rely on the digital space as much as we can, and everyone will have a different opinion. I think now is the time we have to reengage outside of the virtual space to really find that meaning. Again, I'm really looking forward to the holidays and being in person with other people in a room. I just don't think you can replicate that as much as I professionally try to do it for organizations, social media cannot replace relationships.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([30:46](#)):

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 Reform Judaism @WRJ1913. Our show is produced by Sheer 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.