

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 Zibby Owens.

([00:58](#)):

When Queen Esther boldly appears before King Ahasuerus against royal protocol, she does so at risk of her own life and safety. After days of banquets and careful planning, she reveals Haman's plot to the king. If it pleases your majesty, let my life be granted as my wish, my people as my request, for we have been sold, my people and I to be destroyed, massacred, and killed. This is the moment that Esther goes public with her Judaism. Up until that time, she had kept her faith a secret. She steps up and steps out just for this moment, owning her Jewish identity, knowing that from her position of authority and her stature, she alone has the power to save her people. We are again living in a precarious time to be publicly Jewish. Each of us has a choice before us, whether or not to speak up and speak out and to identify with our faith in the public square, in our professional or our personal lives.

([02:05](#)):

The repercussions can be damaging or even dangerous. How like Esther's time is our moment today? Zibby Owens, my guest, is founder and CEO of Zibby Media, which includes the Zibby Books Boutique Publishing House, Zibby's Bookshop, and the award-winning daily podcast, "Moms Don't Have Time to Read Books," which she hosts. She's a bestselling author and editor of three anthologies, including "On Being Jewish Now," which was released this fall. This collection of essays from authors and advocates explores what it means to be Jewish, how life has changed since October 7th, 2023, and the unique culture that brings this group together. In her own words. Introducing this anthology, Owen's writes, "As my public identity went from complete nobody to somebody who could potentially help others, I didn't feel fear in speaking out about the things I believed in. I speak out because I feel things incredibly deeply. Pain, hurt, unfairness, joy, all of it." Like Esther, Owens and others who bring their Judaism into their public lives, each of us has a choice, about when, how, and where we speak out. It can be hard to even know when or how to start speaking up, which is why I invite my guests to begin with sharing their own story and journey. Your story is yours. Your story is your power.

Zibby Owens ([03:43](#)):

I was raised Jewish but not overly observant. I went to Hebrew school every Wednesday. I was bat mitzvahed. I was confirmed. We celebrated Hanukkah, we went to the high holidays. We spent all year picking my outfit when I was a little girl for what I would wear to the high holidays, and it's a part of our family. I mean, it's who we are and my family's very proud of being Jewish and I have a mezuzah on the door and we celebrate Shabbat and my second husband converted to Judaism, which was a really fun experience to watch him go through that. The past year or so has just been something I've kind of taken for granted as just a part of who I am, one of many parts, and this part is in the spotlight right now. Sometimes different pieces of us are highlighted, and I feel like this one is sort of having its shining moment given everything that's been going on, but it has been there all along. And I belong to two temples in New York and my kids are in Hebrew school now. I have two of them have been Bar and Bat Mitzvah. The other two have their dates. I have to book one of the parties. I'm a Jewish mom. It's just who I am.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([04:57](#)):

For me, it's also so just a part of how I grew up and what defines my life. And for so many of us and for folks who may not be working or leading directly in the Jewish world, then it's the kind of thing where you're thinking about, okay, there is my life and then there's my Judaism, and then suddenly the moment calls us to say my Judaism needs to be a little bit more front and center in my life. And one of the things that I've been really inspired by the work that you're doing and other Jewish authors and folks in media is being really public about your Jewish identity in this past year, since October 7th, I think many people were out there and speaking publicly in the months and years that preceded that as antisemitism was on the rise. But I'm curious what that's been like for you and was there a moment where you felt like there was a risk to being in that public Jewish space and what that journey has been like for you?

Zibby Owens ([06:02](#)):

I had been, when the moment struck me posting about being Jewish, if I had a beautiful table for Rosh Hashanah or lighting the candles or challah baking or whatever, I had never thought twice about posting that type of content. And I did do that. Did I think about it in terms of fear? I'm still scared. I feel like we're all at risk and sometimes I think nothing I do is might matter, so I might as well be open about it. It never occurred to me not to do it. There are times when I've wondered, is this going too far? I'm not trying to be super controversial or political, and I don't in any area of my life, my whole thing is connecting emotionally. So I feel like if I can just put my emotional truth out there and enter into the fray that way, then that's what I have to do. But how can I sit by and not speak up? I mean, that's my obligation. I feel if I can, then I must, and so I do.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([07:08](#)):

Yeah, I think for me, that's why Esther has been such an inspiring character for the theme of this podcast. The name, Just For This, comes from the Purim story where Esther's uncle comes to her and she's been queen, but hiding her identity and says, the lives of all the Jewish people are at risk from Haman's evil plot, and you alone are the person who can step up to save us, to save everyone. And she does that, and she's in that moment and she thinks for a second, am I the right person? But she really doesn't hesitate even at risk to her own life. So I've loved asking my guests, is there a moment like that for you? Is that something where you felt like you've been in the right place at the right time to lead?

Zibby Owens ([07:57](#)):

I feel like I'm in the right place at the right time. In fact, I feel like so many variables in my life have come into place so that I can do this. I started a publishing company, which is not something I ever had had planned to do, but wanted to do. So after getting to know so many authors, because I had this publishing company, because I had done two anthologies during the pandemic, because I am part of this artist against antisemitism group, because of all these things, because I move quickly, because I know I have media connections now. All of the things put me in a position where I can come out with this anthology, which I'm not trying to say is going to save the world or anything, but it is something tangible that I can do that I think is really going to help people emotionally.

([08:45](#)):

And I feel like I'm in a unique spot to be able to do it, and I feel very, very grateful for that. Is there a moment where I have debated whether or not to come forward? gating I worry, my moments are about social media posting. Is this okay? I hesitate sometime, I try to make sure what I'm saying is the most

authentic and the most helpful and doesn't put me at risk or my family at risk. I mean, yeah, I'm still scared about it. I just decided usually I make tour slides of all the events coming up on the tour. I've just decided I'm not doing that. The individual communities are going to be promoting. Do I need to tell everybody in the world exactly where I'm going to be when? Maybe not right now,

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([09:30](#)):

Right? There are ways to lead and to be out there and to be really public, but also to do it with a level of safety, even if that's not something that we might've thought about specifically before, which saddens me, but also is just sort of the reality that we're living in.

Zibby Owens ([09:46](#)):

And to make sure all the contributors are okay and all of that. Yeah, I mean, I'm dying to ask you about your entire journey, but I know this is not the way you do the show.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([09:56](#)):

No, we can do that for sure. And I a little bit expected that because you're so often in the interview seats. I grew up outside of Boston, but my particular suburb wasn't actually that heavily Jewish, even though there are many predominantly Jewish towns in that outside of Boston ring. So I was always going somewhere to connect with my Judaism, even though it was very important to my grandparents on all sides, to my parents, and to my extended family. So we were going to our synagogue, which was in the next town. I grew up active in a Reform synagogue and very early on going to Reform Movement summer camp out in the Berkshires out in Western Mass or going to Israel to connect with people. So for me, it was always about seeking out and going to those places and then showing up with this feeling of, even though I walked around kind of regularly in the world, feeling a little bit like I was a little different, and we celebrated different holidays, and I loved Jewish music from a young age, and just being active and connected, that when I was in those spaces that I needed to go to, that I was with people who inherently understood me, and appreciated and respected me, and cared about me.

([11:19](#)):

So it was going to those places, and so often the rabbis and other clergy who were there a lot in the formative youth experiences that I had were young, fun, campy rabbis who they would send out, who were playing guitar, and wearing shorts, and playing wiffle ball, and going in the pool, and all that kind of thing. And I thought from that young age, wow, I can be a person who creates meaning and connection and belonging for people, and I can do it as a real human in a real authentic way. So that's always been my guide. I knew from a young age that I wanted to be a rabbi. It took me longer than that to figure out what I wanted to do, which is why I've enjoyed serving as the rabbi and director of a summer camp, and a congregational rabbi, and now leading a national organization. But I think that for me, it always comes back to helping people feel like they're in a space of connection and that they feel like they're bringing a sense of meaning and belonging to their lives.

Zibby Owens ([12:22](#)):

I love that. I think maybe in my next life I'll be a rabbi.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([12:27](#)):

I think that for me, it does come to that idea of a rabbi is a way that you show up in the world, and there's so many ways to be and to do that. And I think that that's even changed in the past few decades

of moving beyond the sort of traditional only in a congregation pathway as I celebrate and honor my friends, my husband who serve in those type of roles, and also at the same time to know that there's many ways to serve and to be there. I'm sure you met and ran into and encountered many rabbis when you were putting together that anthology, and I would love to hear a little bit more about that project, what it's going to look like, and the experience of bringing that together.

Zibby Owens ([13:10](#)):

Yes. Actually four rabbis did contribute to the anthology, and I decided to group them together in the table of contents for a section called, "Listen the Rabbi is Talking." Yes, those were rabbis who either I knew, I had had on my podcast, or were friends of other founders of Artists Against Antisemitism. Yeah, it's been wonderful reaching out. The process of asking people to do it after I came up with the idea in late June, and this has been the quickest turnaround project ever, was just asking anybody I could think of who had been on my podcast lately, who I was friendly with as an author, or who other people who were on this founding committee knew. And I sent out about 200 asks and 75 people said yes. One of the negating factors was the fast turnaround time. Obviously I needed the essay within three weeks, and the people who stepped up, jumped up.

([14:03](#)):

So it's a very engaged group of contributors who have said yes, all different types of contributors, all different types of backgrounds. Obviously there is huge diversity among the Jewish population. I think that's reflected here. We have someone who's Black and Jewish. We have descendants of Holocaust survivors and not. We have converted Jews. We have people who didn't even know they were Jewish till later in life. We have all different experiences with the religion and with their own identity. So the collection is supposed to be something that anyone can find themselves in, Jewish or not. It's about the importance of a culture. And I think in the essays, it really reflects who we are as a people and some of the strengths or stereotypes or all of that. But really what brings us together, and then kind of the pain that we're all collectively in at this current moment.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([14:57](#)):

I think it's so inspiring that you put together this anthology, this project, for a couple of reasons. The first is what you were just reflecting on about the diversity of Jewish life. And I think that while that's an emerging theme and people who are really plugged into Jewish communal work are more and more aware of it, both if we're actively working toward making our communities and our spaces more open and welcoming and diverse and acknowledging the diversity that exists within our communities, and also just that that's a reality of who we are, but it's not as apparent to folks who are a little bit less plugged in. So I love that you're sharing that that's highlighted, and that's a feature of the anthology because I think that is essential piece of what it means to be Jewish today. And also I think something that I'm excited about the pieces that you've put together is it's all around the idea of being Jewish today, both from a sense of coming together and this collection of voices and being out there and being proud about Jewish identity and feeling like a proud public Jew. And also that pain and that challenge of it at the same time. And for me, that's really sort of the crux of what being Jewish in this moment means, is that we feel this pride, we feel this joy, we feel this connection. We want to come together to have a sense of not being alone and also of the joy that we feel when we come together, that it doesn't have to all be pain even when we're in one of the most difficult and challenging periods of modern Jewish history.

Zibby Owens ([16:43](#)):

And this whole notion that you mentioned of publicly Jewish, which I find so fascinating that everybody is saying that this is what it is. I mean, as a group of people, we have survived by hiding, all the stories of getting through. And so what we're doing is so counter to what we've been taught and ingrained in and why stick your head up when you could hide and be okay? And so it's not our natural instinct, and it makes us nervous and it should.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([17:12](#)):

Yeah. Well, and I think that one of the things that I started paying attention to in the past several months was I'm a reader and I follow a lot of Jewish authors, and Gabrielle Zevin was one of the authors who I saw was on a list, right? Did you see that list that was going around of Zionist authors? And that was one of the things that I started paying attention to a couple months ago of wow, whether or not this person is sort of publicly Jewish as we've been talking about, but maybe inherently either in their family, their background, or some of the characters, the details that they describe the characters that she has in "tomorrow and tomorrow," that to me felt really dangerous and really scary and is one of the reasons that I really appreciated the work that you're doing to be able to create a safe space, not just for authors who are in this collection, but I really think also for authors to know that there's someone who cares about and respects the backgrounds and the identities and the values that they have.

Zibby Owens ([18:22](#)):

And as an author, I was on some, but not all of the lists. I'm like, is this a list I want to be on or not? No, it's not actually. So I know that feeling and that fear and all of that, but in addition to helping the authors and the author community, I just got a DM this morning from a woman named Sarah who said, I lost my cousin. I haven't been able to do anything and your content has helped me through in such a big way, even though I feel paralyzed to do anything right now. And that means everything. And if I can somehow give the tiniest bit of comfort to someone in the worst time of their life, I mean, it's a mitzvah.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([19:03](#)):

Yeah. I think that the pride piece is important, but also the comfort and people are looking for that comfort and that place of somebody understands me, someone's hearing me, and in the end, sometimes that's what a good book is, is just being able to say, I find some comfort and strength in this story in what we're connecting to is just important as well too.

Zibby Owens ([19:27](#)):

Agreed, totally.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([19:28](#)):

We've talked around and about it a little bit, but I'm wondering if you could reflect on October 7th and sort of what you're seeing, what you're experiencing, and maybe how that shows up for some of the authors in the anthology too.

Zibby Owens ([19:44](#)):

I mean, everybody, October 7th was another one of these clear delineations in the sand. I mean, as we're talking, it's September 10th, September 11th was the last big one, honestly, and I lost my best friend on that day and it was horrific. And so I feel like now there's yet another marker in the timeline of my life of before and after, and I didn't know anybody personally, wasn't like my private life got

shattered, but just being a part of this community. Even last night, I just spent all this time looking at these new pictures of the tunnel and all the conditions where Hersh and Eden and everybody, I'm like, I have to go to bed. Why am I doing this? There's six people. There are lots of people who are killed all the time. Why can I not stop with this? I'm obsessed with the hostages and everything, and not that I shouldn't be.

[\(20:38\)](#):

It's just, I think we're all just rooted in horror and the symbolism even of what's been going on and what it means personally. It makes me have all the feelings, right? I'm sobbing, I'm crying. Some days I just can't get through the day, and this is when I don't even know the people myself. But you feel like you do. Other days I feel angry. Other days I feel hopeless. I mean, it's all the things. In terms of how it's affected me professionally, I think it has affected me. My novel, "Blank," came out in March and it features a Jewish woman protagonist, which was not like a strategic thing. Of course she was Jewish because I'm Jewish. It was just so obvious. So before it came out on Goodreads, there was some sort of campaign to tank the book and the writings of it, and I got all these one star ratings and someone said, "Zionist racist."

[\(21:40\)](#):

And it was clear it was for that. And I ended up writing a substack about it. I have a substack that I write on frequently, and I'm very open in it, and I took a screenshot of the person, "I'm like, really? You think this guy has read this book?" No, no one's read this book. And enough people complained that they actually took it down. So that was the first thing. A lot of the authors who I've interviewed ended up being sort of on the different side of things as the bifurcation comes down, or I've been really disappointed to see some of their reactions. I've had a number of people cancel who were planning to be upcoming guests, yet I also took this unintentionally public stand when I pulled out of the National Book Awards because I was a sponsor there in November, and I had gotten word that a lot of the authors were all banding together to make, we didn't know what, but they were all getting together to do something. And I was concerned and just called the organizer and said, well, we don't know what it is, but what if it's something antisemitic? What if everybody gets up there and says, from the river to the sea and starts protesting? What if? What are you going to do? And they said, nothing. It's free speech. People can say whatever they want. And I just didn't feel comfortable bringing in my team and sitting there and sponsoring an event where it was going to make people feel uncomfortable. So I said, you know what? I just can't sponsor this. I'm really sorry. And I didn't mean for it to be, I did write about it because I was really upset that this was going to be allowed to happen, and I wanted to protect anybody watching it or anybody there. And it became a whole thing, but then it was picked up as this international news story, and that unleashed this whole torrent of tweets and whatever, the people who were just so mean and terrible. And I just had to like, okay, well just going to watch this fly over me and just note who is saying what and who is being supportive and not, and just let that sink in and move on with my life.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(23:47\)](#):

There is sort of the rational part of what we do. And then there's the feeling part of what we do, and you were sharing your reflections on thinking about the hostages and sort of asking yourself and those who lost their lives, those who are still held hostage. But I think that it's not rational, and at the same time, it completely makes sense that there's this deep and inherent connection to Jewish people around the world if you feel connected into Jewish peoplehood and Jewish identity, and it's not at the exclusion of feeling connected and care for all people in the world. I think that for me, that's never been in conflict to say I feel an innate and personal and deep connection to Jewish people who are doing amazing things

in the world and Jewish people who are suffering because I feel and understand, and even irrationally know that it's in the spiritual metaphysical, religious realm to feel that connection. And at the same time, you can care for all people that both things can exist and that the decision that you made to do the things that you've been doing and to speak up and to stand out. Folks who don't understand that there's this inherent peoplehood and personal and particular connection that many Jewish people feel to those around the world in close and wider circles is not in conflict with deep respect and care for people around the world. Then the choices to speak out publicly just don't always make sense.

Zibby Owens ([25:35](#)):

I just am going by my gut a lot of the time while trying to consult with other Jewish wise women in my life and men, and it seemed so obvious. Some of these decisions at the time were like, no-brainers. It just seemed so clear which way to go.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([25:54](#)):

I'd love to ask you, as you're reflecting a little bit on wise women wise leaders, other folks that you've talked with, and also knowing that you sit in this incredible seat, you reflected on it a little bit too of having different connections and the company that you run and your publishing house and the podcast and all the different pieces coming together that you lead from this amazing place. And at the same time, I think that we're in a moment where women have come really far, and also there's still so much further to go and so many challenges that women face in every field across every discipline. I've always been interested in sort of Esther's character and how she represents that because she gets to this level as the queen, but of course she's the queen, not the king, and there's only so far that she can go in that role. I'm wondering if you have faced barriers to your leadership as a woman in leadership, or if there are other reflections you have about that experience, things that you've seen in the publishing world, media world, and beyond.

Zibby Owens ([27:05](#)):

I have to be honest. I have not actually felt anti-women. I can't reach the top. I don't feel like that. I know it exists. I'm well aware and there are obviously things that we need to improve for women, paid leave and all sort, all of that, and equal pay, and these are such important things. But I believe in everybody having the chance to succeed and having as equal a playing field, I guess as possible.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([27:32](#)):

I think it's really important what you're saying. I like to focus both in my work and in my personal life on making sure that women are empowered able to exceed and that barriers, whether they're related to laws or people's biases or opinions or women's own self-doubt and lack of confidence that none of those things are barriers. I'm wondering if in your publishing house, if you found that women-identified authors, female-identified authors are attracted toward like, oh, here's sort of an opportunity for me where maybe there might've been doors closed otherwise. I was curious if you've experienced that and that authors who are coming to you.

Zibby Owens ([28:13](#)):

I think that a lot of authors that we work with are grateful to all be lead titles because we treat every book as a lead title. And I think in some houses, some of the lead titles, particularly in some genres, are often the men. I will say at our publishing house, we've only acquired works by women and have one male author and have all but one female employee at our company. It wasn't intentional. I never said I

want to start a company and only hire women, but running a company that's based on connection and community and emotion, and I feel like I run it like how I mother. It's very personal. I have everybody to lunch at my house like three days a week, and I feel like for a while those sort of softer skills that women had were put off to the side in favor of male professionalism, and I actually think those are our superpower and we can achieve far more using them than not. And so I've kind of leaned into that.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([29:56](#)):

I'm your host, Rabbi Liz Hirsch, executive director 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.