

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([00:41](#)):

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 Barbara Weinstein.

([00:56](#)):

On November 5th, Donald J. Trump was elected as the 47th president of the United States defeating Vice President Kamala Harris. My guest today, Barbara Weinstein, is Associate Director of the Religious Action Center, the Reform Jewish Denomination's office in Washington DC. She also directs the Commission on Social Action. Barbara and I spoke just two days after the election to process the outcome. We honed in on gender, abortion access, and more. If you are looking to get involved and stay engaged with these issues, look for opportunities to connect with Women of Reform Judaism, the organization I am honored to lead, and the Religious Action Center, our frequent partner in advocacy, organizing, and social justice. You can find out more about WRJ's upcoming conference in Washington D.C. in our show notes. We hope you will join us. On November 6th, as the world woke up to the results of the election, I wrote and shared this prayer. I hope it brings you some comfort and hope, particularly with a nod to the inspiration of our podcast, Queen Esther. Nachamu, Nachamu ami. As Isaiah called out to God, Today, I do, too. Nachamu, Nachamu Ami. Comfort us, comfort our people. You don't speak directly to us. Like you once did your prophets. And still. We tried, so hard, to follow in their footsteps. To be prophetic pursuers of justice. To hold our kings and rulers to account. To declare that pikuach nefesh is paramount. To protect the lives and bodies of women, of all people who can become pregnant. To safeguard trans individuals. To stem the rampant destruction of our earth. To defend our very democracy. To heal the fractures of our divided land. Why, God? Al tasteir paneha. Don't hide your face from us. Answer us. Sh'ma koleinu. For those crying out, angry, afraid. Answer us. Hear our voices. What is our mission now? What lies on the road ahead? We look to the prophet Mikah. Your prophets can still be our guide. We have been told before, and we know what we must do. Only this: Do justice Love mercy Walk humbly with your God. We walk humbly into a new reality. A time of disappointment and fear. A time not to forget what we can and must do. Like Queen Esther, We rise to the challenge of our new era. For who knows? Maybe it is just for this moment that we find ourselves in a position to exercise leadership. Be strong and resolute. Find comfort in each other. Together, We will pursue justice and mercy, and walk humbly onward.

([04:13](#)):

Barbara Weinstein, my guest today. It's good to see you this morning and when we plan to have this conversation, we didn't know what was going to happen on Election Day and here we are to jump in and do some processing, some debrief through the lens, both of the work that we do together at different arms and affiliates of the Reform Movement, and also thinking about the gender and women in leadership lens that I bring to this podcast as we process and think about what happened on election day. So love to just start out with some of your initial thoughts and for us to get into it with some of the things that we typically consider on the podcast. And then also thinking about some of the gender dynamics at play this week.

Barbara Weinstein ([04:59](#)):

I am thrilled to join you. It is always a pleasure to not only talk to you of course, but to do anything with WRJ. Personally and professionally, WRJ has just always been endlessly supportive. We have a shared staff person as you know, and it's just a great relationship. So I'm very happy to be on this fantastic podcast. Look, I think there's two pieces that we're looking at in this. We're talking 36 hours after Election Day, and there is obviously disappointment about the outcome on ballot initiatives that we engaged around in terms of the concerns about certainly some of the rhetoric that President Trump uses that we find deeply disturbing around demonization, dehumanization, and policies that we have concerns about policy proposals that he campaigned on. And we're also understanding that even as we hold that, we are tremendously proud that seven out of the 10 ballot initiatives around abortion rights passed nationwide, very disappointed about the outcome in Florida, of course, but the threshold of 60%, there was always a very high reach.

[\(06:14\)](#):

We're going to keep working. We also know that through our Every Voice, Every Vote campaign, we reached 750,000 voters, which is a tremendous accomplishment. So, we want to take pride in all that we achieved, even as we look at the work that still has to be done. And above all, I know I personally, and I think each of us take tremendous comfort from the fact that we're doing this together. That's one of the beauties of doing election protection, civic engagement work together as a movement that everything we do is in community, the way we come together in community and moments of joy and in moments of sadness, we are together. And going forward, we're going to be together still and keep working to realize the vision that we have of a world of greater justice.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([07:04](#)):

That's right. I want to talk about all the things that you just mentioned and just to pick up on the last piece, I think that at a time when people might be feeling isolated or alone or unsure of what things are going to come in the future, that being able to connect in with community is always the most important piece in a really a solve to all of those things.

Barbara Weinstein ([07:28](#)):

Yeah, for sure. Election Day this year fell right after Sukkot, and we always have this quippy little line about going from the sukkah booth to the voting booth, but I love the image of the sukkah because it is open on certainly to be able to see the stars, but we have this openness that invites guests into the sukkah, and it's a reminder that we're never cutting ourselves off from community, that we're strongest. We're at our most whole when we are reaching out and being in relationship with other people. And there's no more pure expression of that than Election Day when kind of the nation pauses, people go and they have this experience of being flooded with information before Election Day, and then we're all filling out our ballots, mailing them in, showing up at the ballot box. And it is the ultimate act of communal expression. And it really, I think, dovetails so beautifully with what an essence of Jewish life is, which is all of these communal experiences, whether it's welcoming guests into our sukkah or sitting together around a Seder table or even beginning a prayer service when we have a minyan of 10, that's really who we are and what we are as a people.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([08:41](#)):

Well, and I think that that distinguishes and infuses a lot of the work that we both do. Everything that we do either through the RAC, or WRJ, or together is framed in the context of Jewish values. We open meetings with prayers, we have that grounding in our values that are guiding us through our policy

resolutions that are built upon Jewish values in the way that we see the world. And that's distinct because we allow our values to inspire us and to be the grounding for the work that we do.

Barbara Weinstein ([09:14](#)):

Yeah, a hundred percent. And I think that adds to the richness, right? There's lots of groups out there that are doing voter engagement work or the work we do when it's not election season around issue advocacy, around community organizing. But what we uniquely bring to the table is this Jewish infusion that marries our identity as Reform Jews and our identity as Americans, Canadians, people who are civically engaged in our country, our communities, and beyond.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([09:43](#)):

I think before we get into some of the specific post-election topics, it might be helpful, and I know you get this question a lot, I get this question a lot to help clarify for folks what we work on as 501(c)(3) and religious organizations and what we don't work on, and especially how that work kind of bumps up against elections, campaigns, all of those issues. It would be amazing if you could just run us through that for folks who are less familiar with that. Before we get into talking about the issues.

Barbara Weinstein ([10:14](#)):

It is definitely a topic we get a lot of questions on, certainly around election season, but all year round. The idea is that under the tax code, there's a section called 501(c)(3) and it relates to nonprofit organization and it outlines what not just the restrictions are and responsibilities, but also the benefits we get. So as in our case, the RAC or the Union for Reform Judaism, which is our parent entity or WRJ or any of our synagogues across the movement, we are all what is called a 501(c)(3) organization. It's a nonprofit tax exempt organization, and the benefit is that people can make donations to our organizations and get a tax deduction for it. That comes with responsibilities at the same time. And one of those is that we are not allowed to implicitly or explicitly endorse or oppose candidates or parties for office.

([11:12](#)):

And so it really has its most significant implications around election season because once someone is no longer a candidate, then we certainly, we can talk about this in a moment for other reasons, would never want to align ourselves with a particular party or individual. We're always focused on the issues that we're concerned about in either advancing or opposing. But in terms of this obligation around election season, it is always permitted for us to speak about the issues and that's why we engage so deeply around all of these ballot initiatives around reproductive rights, around the Equal Rights Amendment in New York, and others. But what we would never do is endorse or oppose any particular candidate or party. First and foremost because it would be a violation of our obligations under this section of the law. And secondly, and really equally importantly, because we know that we are a faith denomination, we know that we have people of different political and ideological affiliations within our congregations, within our organizations, and we very much derive strength from that diversity. And we would never want to become a voice or a mouthpiece, an arm, of any particular candidate or party. So for all of those reasons, that's what we mean when we talk about the obligations of being a 501(c)(3) entity.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([12:40](#)):

That's right. And I think that for me and for others, I'd be curious if this is a takeaway that you're having as well. In these recent days since the election, our country is more divided along political lines in which party or candidate they feel connected to, right? It was as even as it possibly could be. We want to make sure that our movement and our organizations are places where people of diverse political backgrounds and certainly what party they vote for in the voting booth does not inhibit them from connecting with us and feeling part of our community.

Barbara Weinstein ([13:15](#)):

Absolutely. Look, our movement is not at all immune to the forces that are permeating across the country generally. And everyone knew all you had to do was look at a newspaper headline or check out your social media feed, that this was going to be an incredibly close election. That the country really does have this very significant divide happening right now. And I think one of the unique roles that we can play as a faith denomination is to find ways to have those conversations always rooted in our values. Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the president of the URJ, said something I thought that was so beautiful yesterday that talked about nonpartisan is not neutral, right? We know who we are and what our values are. Those don't change, and we need to find ways to engage and to see the other. Every individual we always talk about has the spark of the divine in them. We need to find that spark, find what areas there are of commonality. And I think that is a unique thing that we can do as one of the few spaces in public life where people do come together. Otherwise we tend to self-sort the way we spend our time. But houses of worship are a place of greater mixing of people of different thoughts and ideologies and political voting patterns, et cetera. So I think that's a real opportunity for us as WRJ, as the RAC, as a movement overall.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([14:42](#)):

Even though there have been studies that people are most likely to change their church or their synagogue based on their political beliefs, we still know that there's diversity of perspectives within our communities. I'm just thinking about story that I know about Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, a long time teacher and thinker in the Reform Movement who I had the chance to learn with toward the end of his tenure at the Hebrew Union College. And he evidently used to sit on the subway in New York City and just look at each person down the line. And if anyone has ever been on the subway in New York City, it is certainly a diverse place and just do kind of a meditative practice of in his mind, think and look at each person created in the image of God, created in the image of God, created in the image of God. I think that's really, really hard to do in this moment. And maybe it's a practice that we all need to and could take on.

Barbara Weinstein ([15:39](#)):

That is really beautiful and certainly is a level of intentionality we could probably all aspire to.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([15:46](#)):

Yeah. Wow. So thinking about the abortion access ballot initiatives, this is something that I've been personally passionate about since working on getting RAC Massachusetts, the RAC state project in Massachusetts when I was living in working there off the ground because we didn't have the Dobbs decision, we didn't have the end of Roe v. Wade and a federal access to abortion as the law of the land yet. But there was anticipation that some type of decision like that was coming and the potential for the end of federal access to abortion was going to end. So I worked with a group of leaders in Massachusetts to organize on a state level piece of legislation, and through a lot of twists and turns and

amazing organizing and advocacy with Reform Movement, synagogues and sisterhoods and social justice, social action committees getting all together, we were able in that coalition to pass that state level abortion access legislation that enshrined it in Massachusetts state law.

[\(16:52\)](#):

And that's really been patterned in the ballot initiatives that we've seen post the Dobbs decision in the last cycle. And now in this one, I also have seen a lot of connections and resonances between the way that freedom for marriage and an equal marriage eventually passed of having state-based state-based state-based until where was a cascade on that level. So there's been some strength in that strategy up until this cycle. We've really been able to argue that when abortion access and reproductive health care are on the ballot, then people make the choice to have that, and that is something that they want. And when they're asked the question, now we heard and saw a little bit of a different story in this cycle, but we also had a lot of really exciting moments where our values, our care for making sure that people can have access to bodily autonomy and freedom, embracing that value of kavod habriyot and also in more extreme circumstances, we think about the value of pikuach nefesh, of saving the life of the mother or the person who's pregnant who may be at serious risk. But this is against this really intense and extreme backdrops. So let's talk about what happened in this cycle.

Barbara Weinstein [\(18:11\)](#):

Look, I mean, there were 10 states where abortion was on the ballot, and the last thing I've seen is that we've got results in all, but one of them. And we know that the voters in Arizona and Colorado, Maryland, Nevada, and New York all embraced these post-ops efforts to protect abortion access. It failed in Florida and it failed in South Dakota. Florida in particular had this 60% threshold, which was unique among the initiatives on the ballot this cycle, and I'm pretty sure actually unique among any of the post-Dobbs ballot initiatives that have come out in the last couple of years. So that's a particularly high threshold. At Florida, it got 57%, well north of a majority, but 3% short of what the law required. And to be frank, that was intentional on the part of those who do not want to see abortion access in Florida, they created this incredibly high threshold to be met, and unfortunately it wasn't.

[\(19:16\)](#):

But I know that we are taking heart not only about that 57% that did endorse, and it'll be interesting to see how things unfold in the next period of time. If this comes back to another vote in front of Florida voters as they come to understand the really draconian implications of this six week abortion ban in Florida, an abortion ban that kicks in, frankly before most people know they're even pregnant, and this is going to be a real life or death experience tragically for individuals who are experiencing pregnancies that are causing a threat to the life of the mother or in other ways catastrophic. It is possible that this will come back again on the ballot at a future date. I know everyone is looking at what next steps are, but we're incredibly proud that just with our Florida State Initiative RAC Florida, we got 17,000 signatures to get this petition on the ballot, which was absolutely incredible. On the part of our Florida activists, we did more than 10 text banks and phone banks to get people to turn out. So yes, we didn't reach that threshold, but this is also about what we talked about earlier, building relationships, building community, laying a groundwork for future efforts, certainly around abortion and other efforts around whatever the challenges we're going to have to face together. So we don't always get the results we want on the first try, but we are laying a tremendous groundwork and network of relationships for the future also.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(20:50\)](#):

Yeah, I want to really celebrate our advocates and folks engaged in congregations, sisterhoods, women's groups on the ground, and especially just thinking about Florida, how hard everyone worked and the groundwork that was laid, but whether it was that engagement that organizing, the relationship building that happened in Florida, I saw that in Massachusetts, we've seen it in many other states where we do this state level and more local work throughout the country that we're really in this place of seeing that we're prepared for what happens next and that we can activate those networks that much more quickly, whether it's around responding again to this immediate issue or something else that's going to come up.

Barbara Weinstein ([21:34](#)):

Yes, because this challenge is not going away. People are going to need this kind of reproductive health care. They've needed it since the beginning of time. They're going to need it till the end. And for so many people, this really is a matter of core wellness and health, sometimes a matter of life and death. And I think especially our voice as a faith community speaking about the importance of reproductive rights is so valuable and unique in this space that it is just so important that we continue to maintain the energy and commitment around this issue among all issues. Because oftentimes people associate the faith voice with an anti-choice, anti-abortion access viewpoint, and we are here saying no, that there is another faith tradition, another faith teaching a different faith understanding of how we look at these issues, and we bring that moral deeply faithfully rooted voice to the table.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([22:38](#)):

I couldn't agree more. I feel personally obligated. And then on behalf of Women of Reform Judaism, just to speak out three times as often about abortion access and reproductive care and all of those pieces because it isn't necessarily what people assume the faith perspective is when it comes to those issues. And I think something else that people were interested in was how was the threat to reproductive care, to IVF, to abortion access to all of these pieces, driving folks to the voting booth overall, and how we saw that that played out not just in those state level ballot initiatives, but I think it was really something that through the democracy and voter engagement work and through Every Voice, Every Vote we saw was really driving people to come out and vote as well too.

Barbara Weinstein ([23:30](#)):

Yeah, I actually have not yet seen data on voting rates. We already know that historically levels of Jewish voting rates tend to far exceed the general population voting rates. I would strongly expect that to continue in this cycle as well, because there is such a understanding of the potential threats to life and health, and it is a huge motivator, certainly I think for Jewish women who are often at the vanguard of efforts around reproductive rights and generally a motivator to show up at the ballot box for sure.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([24:09](#)):

Thinking about that connection between these issues that we care about and that motivate people to vote, whether on the local level for their ballot initiatives or in federal elections as we just went through this cycle, there was a thought and a theory that restrictions on access to abortion would draw out as many voters as possible. That theory seems to be proving out that people came out and were motivated to vote about that. And at the same time, the threshold fell short if we're thinking about the candidate from the party and federal level, presidential perspective, more inclined toward those policies and thinking about maintaining our perspective on, as we were discussing about our 501 C3 status and the way that we engage with candidates as much as the issues at hand. We know that with Donald Trump elected as the 47th president, that some of the policies that we're likely to see in place, and we have this



roadmap and understanding of that from his previous term in office, may cause severe challenges and risks to the values and also to the policies that we care about and show up for. What are we seeing hearing already? I know that there are conversations that are beginning about the potential for a national abortion ban and how are you at the RAC starting to organize and how are we going to start thinking about that together?

Barbara Weinstein ([25:33](#)):

The issues around reproductive rights among others are of tremendous concern. So number one, there are a lot of steps that states are taking, especially states where there is a commitment to protecting abortion rights to kind of create a firewall between what the federal government can impose and what the states rules are. Number two, I know a lot of legal experts and states are also looking at thorny legal questions that frankly we haven't had to deal with in a real way before. So for example, let's say that state, just a hypothetical example. Let's say that Texas imposed a full abortion ban and decided to prosecute an individual for violating that ban. If that person were then traveling in California that didn't have such a ban, but were stopped for, I don't know, speeding. If the police officer punched in their information and got a thing saying they had an outstanding arrest warrant in Texas for a violation of the Texas abortion ban, what would the legal obligations of that officer in California be?

[\(26:46\)](#):

And these are questions again, that legal experts are looking at right now, and we're all going to have to figure out how we're going to address that as individuals, as voters, as folks who may have the ear of lawmakers, what we're going to be advocating for or against, et cetera. It's a really complicated legal question. We haven't had to deal with it before, but we have to deal with it now. The third piece of it is around the courts. And so many of these issues are going to be decided by lawsuits and the decisions that federal judges are going to be making, certainly at the Supreme Court level, which is how we got into this situation in the first place with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the Supreme Court in the *Dobbs* decision of a few years ago, but also at lower federal court levels, district courts, circuit courts, not every case makes it all the way up to the Supreme Court.

[\(27:40\)](#):

So it's often these lower federal courts that are making law functionally in their decisions. And we are very proud that as a Reform Movement, we're one of the few denominations that actually speaks out on judicial nominations. So in order to get a seat on a federal court, whether it's a district court, a circuit court, or the Supreme Court, an individual is nominated by the president and it then goes through a confirmation process where senators in the United States Senate learn about the individual, their record, they get to review their case history, they get to meet with them, they have open hearings and ultimately vote whether or not to confirm this individual. And so the choices that we as voters make of who will represent us in the Senate are incredibly important, and making sure that we lift our voices to our senators is incredibly important because they're the ones that are going to be deciding who are these judges with lifetime appointments I would add, who are making decisions about reproductive rights, about marriage equality, about environmental restrictions on carbon pollution that's causing climate change, about every issue under the sun that comes before the courts.

[\(28:53\)](#):

It's those judges making the decisions. So those are three areas that we are going to have a particular role to play around advocacy, on policy decisions, and on who the judges that are making these decisions will be that are going to be even more important going forward than they have been to date.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([29:11](#)):

I think that a lot of that can feel like there's an outlet, there's something for us to do. And at the same time, I think a lot of people in these few days after the outcome of the election are feeling a little bit powerless, I would say, right? And sort of where do I go from here? And that's one of the reasons why I love that this podcast is inspired by the story of Esther because she was in the right moment, in the right place at the right time to step up to lead. And I'm wondering if you could reflect a little bit on if you've had an experience like that where you've been in the right place and at the right moment and able to lead, and also how that might inspire our advocates out in the Reform Movement and beyond to feel that they have some agency, some ability to step up as well.

Barbara Weinstein ([30:03](#)):

Yeah. Before I talk about that, I want to go back to the way you kind of led into that question, which is we're all feeling a little bit tired right now. It has been a long stretch of time where we've been mobilizing and organizing and marching and rallying and voting and making phone calls, and it can be exhausting. And if you're feeling disappointed about some of the results in these elections, it can be even more exhausting. And so I just want to remind everybody, and I got to remind myself like this, about 17 times a day, it's okay to take a break, to step back, to give yourself a day where you're not refreshing the New York Times on your desktop 15 times a day, and maybe you're not looking at the latest tweet that whoever posted, and maybe you're taking a walk or knitting or like me playing a really vigorous game of pickleball, whatever it is, do the thing that gives you a mental break, a physical break that restores you for the work ahead, because God knows there's going to be a lot of work ahead.

([31:13](#)):

And, I'll tell you that I have been at the Religious Action Center for more than 22 years now, and it is a very unlikely place in some respects for me to have ended up professionally because I grew up in a very Jewish household, but a very traditionally Jewish household. And I'd never set foot in a Reform anything before I came to the RAC in the early two thousands. But that said, this very Jewishly immersed household I grew up in where both of my parents were Jewish communal professionals where I went to Jewish summer camp and I went to a Jewish day school and kind of checked all those boxes, gave me this incredibly powerful connection to the idea of the strength and solidarity that there is to be found in the Jewish community. And that in so many respects was the opposite of the message that I was seeing as someone growing up in the seventies and eighties as I was coming of age where the message was very much about the civic square or even government being the problem.

([32:20](#)):

There was a very famous quip from Ronald Reagan when he was president, who said, "the scariest sentence in the English language is, 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.'" I couldn't quite square that in my mind because I think of government as the place where we do things together, where we have this incredible set of levers that we can reach people through. How can we make that a tool to strengthen community, to bring people together? And that's really what I love about the RAC as an institution that since our founding in the early 1960s, our mission has been to make a difference in the public square, to lift our voices in the public square, guided by the values and traditions and teachings of our Jewish history. And so for me, the moment of being here just for this is that moment that I walked in the door of the RAC and found my people. And it has just been a huge blessing to get to work with the most incredible colleagues that I've ever known at the RAC, you among them earlier in your career, and the incredible cadre of lay leaders that are just so generous and so supportive and inspired by a desire to make the world a better place. So for me, yeah, that moment is just every day when I get to work and



find tremendous meaning and purpose in what I'm doing and tremendous community and strength in the people that I'm doing it with.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([33:51](#)):

I'm wondering if it is possible if we can end on a moment of hope or inspiration or what folks can do next.

Barbara Weinstein ([34:01](#)):

We're going to swear in the new Congress and the new President just after the new year, and it struck me that this year, Hanukkah actually goes into the new year. It is incredibly late this year, and I always love the image and symbolism of the Hanukiah where each night we start in darkness, and then we get one candle and two candles, and by the end, our room is illuminated by the light of the eight candles, each of them standing side by side, adding to the light that the other one next to it is emanating. And that's the work that we have to do, that each of us alone brings our particular spark of light. And when we stand next to our friends and our colleagues and our neighbors, we get to add and increase the amount of light that we're putting out into our communities, our congregations, our countries, and when it seems the hardest, that's when our light is most needed. So this is a moment where we draw on our Jewish traditions and our Jewish culture and our Jewish faith and our Jewish teachings, and above all our Jewish community, we find our people, we find our opportunities, and together we work to bring more light into the world. That's what we've always done throughout the centuries, and that's what we're going to keep doing.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([35:26](#)):

I am your host, Rabbi Liz Hirsch, CEO of Women of Reform Judaism, and you've been listening to Just For This. Check us out on most social media platforms @justforthispodcast. You can also follow Women of Reform Judaism @WRJ1913. Our show is produced by Sheir and Shim, LLC. Special thanks to Lisa Pincus Hamroff, Aly Rubin, Rabbi Neil Hirsch, Lior, and Mikah. Jen King designed our logo, and Eric Shimelones wrote our theme music. Thanks for listening. We'll have more just for this moment next time.