

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 Sarah Levy.

([00:57](#)):

Recently, Israeli fans of the Maccabi Tel Aviv soccer team were attacked by antisemitic mobs in the streets of Amsterdam. The violence was premeditated and for Jews around the world, another terrifying example of the global rise in antisemitism. Stories of anti-Palestinian rhetoric and isolated actions have emerged as well. This incident is still undeniably one more example of a broader disturbing trend of violent antisemitism, which we've seen in North America, Europe, and beyond. It doesn't have to be this way though. A few weeks ago I spoke to Sarah Levy, a Paris Olympian who came home with a bronze medal in rugby for team USA. Growing up, she lived in South Africa, Israel, and primarily in San Diego, California, where she was proud to belong and engage at her Reform synagogue. It's especially poignant to hear Sarah reflect on her experiences as a Jewish Olympian in light of recent events in Amsterdam. She shares how for a few brief weeks, athletics and sports united people of different faiths, nationalities, and backgrounds. It's also inspiring to hear her reflect on being a woman in sports and the barriers faced by women athletes around the world. And Sarah's own personal story is one of determination and grit. May each of us look to Sarah's bold example to inspire how we show up and step up, just for this moment.

Sarah Levy ([02:36](#)):

I've been playing rugby since I started university back at Northeastern 10 years now. I just fell in love with the sport right away and then just found myself wanting more and more and getting better and better, and then eventually found myself training full time down here in San Diego.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([02:52](#)):

I am one of those people who has always loved watching the Olympics, summer, winter. I love to watch all kinds of sports, but especially the Olympics. There's just something about it. So I was so excited to talk with you today both about your experience at the Olympics, but also I'd just love to know a little bit more about what it was like to be that and into a sport from a young age and just tell us a little bit more about your journey.

Sarah Levy ([03:19](#)):

I grew up playing any sport pretty much. I was thrown into whatever sport I could get my hands on. I was playing soccer, softball, track, golf, tennis, surfing, literally whatever I could do. I remember being in high school and wanting to do something a little more physical and wanting powder puff football to be like a year round thing, or something like football. My dad was South African and I knew about rugby, but I didn't even think that there could be women's rugby. And then I left for college and I found a women's rugby team at the college fair. They were so welcoming and such a great community. The first week I went out to a practice, they're like, okay, we're all going to a tournament this weekend. You're on the roster. I was like, okay, that sounds great. And I just felt like rugby was the first sport that I was good at right away. It came so naturally to me and it was everything that I was missing out of soccer, the

physicality. It was everything that I wanted in all those sports in one, so I felt like I wish I'd started a lot earlier. College was a little bit late for me and I love that in this country now there's so many more girls rugby programs from a younger age and just girls sports in general from a younger age. I think that the country's really shifting toward this just being a norm for women.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([04:49](#)):

Absolutely. I love the idea of sports as a vehicle, not just for athleticism and competition, but also empowering girls and women and thinking about women's sports for sure. I'd love it if you could tell us a little bit more. You mentioned your dad's from South Africa. Tell us a little bit about your family growing up and of course on this podcast we're thinking about Jewish identity and Jewish values. So if you could tell us about your Jewish journey and your Jewish story.

Sarah Levy ([05:20](#)):

My dad's South African. He was raised Jewish as well. My mom converted before they got married and I was born in South Africa, so they met in the U.S.. They went back to South Africa. Then I was born and we lived there for a year, but it was just around the time of the end of the apartheid, so it was a little dangerous there. So my dad really wanted to make Aliyah, so we moved to Israel for a year and we all made Aliyah and then my parents decided that they wanted to move back to the U.S. closer to my mom's family, and that's where they decided to raise us was in San Diego. I went to Jewish Day School for a couple years. I went to the JCC for preschool and was very involved in the JCC in San Diego. And then I ended up going to public school for most of my upbringing, but I was part of a congregation Beth Israel, and I spent most of my free time if I wasn't playing sports,

([06:20](#)):

I was pretty much there after school. I grew up with a really good Jewish community around me. I think I've mentioned this before, but I think that when I moved to college in Boston, I think I really missed that Jewish community that I had and I still was involved with the Hillel at Northeastern, but I think I really found a similar open and welcoming community in the rugby team, and I found that they had such similar values as the values I had in my friends growing up at Hebrew school and all of that. And I just felt at home right away, even though it was something a little bit different.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([07:03](#)):

Have you ever thought about or seen any connections? You're talking about the ways that the friends and the people that you met in your synagogue community and in the rugby team you saw connections between that and found that comfort and connection. Have you ever seen any connections between some of the Jewish values or things talked about in temple and religious school with what you bring to your athleticism to sports?

Sarah Levy ([07:30](#)):

I feel like a lot of the values in rugby are anyone's welcome, any body type, any person, any sexuality, any view of thought. And I thought that that was what I loved about Reform Judaism was you could come from anywhere and we will take you. We don't gate keep our religion from people. We're very welcoming, inviting people to Seders to high holy days. It just felt very similar, outstretched arms kind of mentality, learning about each other's cultures too. So I feel like growing up in Judaism we always were trying to learn about other people's cultures and where other people came from to build that

understanding. And I felt like in rugby we work a lot on learning about each other's backgrounds so that we can understand how to work together better as a team.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([08:24](#)):

I love that, just a similar value of being open and welcoming and making sure that everyone feels a part of it. I was recently chatting with my nieces about how I ran cross country all through high school and I was 100% never going to the Olympics for any kind of running or anything like that. But I loved being on that team because it had the same spirit about it. Everyone was welcome and everyone was supportive of each other. And also what I liked cross country is you were really working and supporting and connected to the team, but you were also really working individually and working on your own skills and trying to beat your own best times and put that forward. So I loved being both in that community and also the way that it had me motivating and driving to beat my times and do better and better.

Sarah Levy ([09:16](#)):

I feel like cross country is a very similar community, especially just you're putting your body on the line. It's all about working hard. And the same thing with rugby is you're just trying to work hard for your teammates for yourself, and that's all that really matters. It really doesn't matter the outcome, it's more about putting your body on the line.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([09:34](#)):

So for folks who are less familiar with rugby, could you tell us a little bit about the position that you play and sort of different things that you've worked on and just familiarize folks a little bit more with the sport?

Sarah Levy ([09:48](#)):

Yeah, so there are two different types of rugby. So if you've watched some on tv, it could have been the fifteens rugby or the sevens rugby, which is 15 aside versus seven aside. And the seven aside is what we play in the Olympics. So there's half the amount of people, so there's twice the amount of space, and I kind of describe it as a mix between soccer and football. There's no stoppages of play, so you're running the whole time and anytime a tackle is made, the play doesn't stop. You set the ball back toward your team and try to go again. The seventh positions are a little more fluid. It's more based on strengths and what strengths you want in the field at the same time. But I'm a hooker in sevens, which means that when they do that throw in thing, I'm the one that gets lifted up in the air by my two teammates to try. It's kind of like a jump ball mixed with a soccer throw in. I mean, there isn't much differences in the positions, but for me also one of my jobs is when we kick the ball off, the ball has to go 10 meters, so we try to kick it as high as possible and then I'm the one that's trying to run onto the ball and tap it back to our team or try to get the ball back for our team. So I would say that's one of my bigger roles on the team.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([11:00](#)):

That's amazing. I've definitely watched some rugby before, but can't say I am a total expert in all the rules and how the different pieces of it work, but it's very cool to hear you talk about it as being fluid. So that means a really strong level of trust, I assume, with your teammates and having the understanding of who's going to be able to do what and practicing in this scenario, this is what happens.

Sarah Levy ([11:23](#)):

Yeah, I think what's also so interesting about our team is we have such a diverse set of skill sets, so different people can play different positions and we'd have a completely different game plan, which makes it really fun and different every time.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([11:39](#)):

Do you have any role models in sports, either in rugby specifically or more generally who have inspired you on your path to being a professional athlete?

Sarah Levy ([11:51](#)):

It's hard to talk about just one. Our team name is called the High Women and it's about women who have paved the way for the women coming behind them, those high women, we do a presentation on them every year. Everyone gets to choose someone that they have determined is their high women of the year and why. And these high women usually involve our team core values, love, work ethic, resilience, courage, and these values are ones that we want to live by every day and these are ones that we want to be reflected in our high women. And I actually have a presentation on one tomorrow, Gertrude Ederle, and she was the first woman to swim the English channel. They just did a movie on her, the Young Woman in the Sea. And I just was really drawn to her story. I think one because my dad loves to open water swim, so I was kind of drawn to it because he kept telling me I should watch the movie just also because she, well, she was also a Paris Olympian, just a hundred years ago, and she tried to swim the English channel the first time it didn't go so well.

([13:03](#)):

And then the second time she tried again and she beat the men's time by two hours. And I just found her really inspiring also because she wasn't particularly great at swimming when she first started. She just decided she wanted to do it and just worked extremely hard at it. And even when she failed at the swimming, the English channel, which is so dangerous, especially back then, she went back still and completed it, which I found also very inspiring. And back then women weren't really known to do sports, but swimming in general wasn't really looked at in a positive way. And I thought that she really also showed that women could even beat men's times, which I thought was also very cool.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([13:49](#)):

That's amazing. And she does have such a cool story. Open water swimming is crazy. I've heard about her story a little bit and you shared even more of it than I knew. I haven't seen the movie yet, but also just the things that they have to do to be able to make that happen is amazing. And what a great inspiration for you and for others. For me, and we're going to talk a little bit more about her, but Queen Esther is a Jewish woman role model for me, par excellence, she is one of the women who gets a story and a name and steps up for leadership and she inspires this podcast. And one of the things that I was thinking about that I was excited to talk with you about was the idea of women stepping up in sports. And something that's interesting about Queen Esther is she gets to this level of being the queen, really kind of the highest level that a woman or a Jewish person could get to in ancient times, but she still also has limits to what she can do.

([14:51](#)):

She even risks her life to be able to go to the king. She's not allowed to even have a meeting or go say hello to her husband without being invited to do that because of the structures and barriers in royal protocol in that time. So I'd just love to hear any thoughts or reflections or maybe a story you have about experiences being a woman in sports and getting to really the highest level to be an Olympic

athlete that someone could be at. And curious if you have faced any barriers along that journey as well too, up to that really high level in your field.

Sarah Levy ([15:29](#)):

I don't know if I have a personal story, but I think in general, our team being a women's sport, I don't think many people watch our game. So we play year round, we play every month in a different country, and rugby is not that popular in general in the U.S., which I think is changing. But for women's sports, it's really hard for us to get sponsorships, get money in general, even though we're one of the more successful teams in the program. And I feel like a lot of my teammates, especially, have taken this upon themselves, which I admire greatly is they've taken to social media and really the reason why we got so much media attention in Paris was because of how much work that they do on social media outside of our job, which just seems like the one way that female athletes can even get out their name out there. I think that we have a little bit of a harder time getting that visibility without putting in that forefront work. So after we got the bronze medal, we got a very great donor, Michelle Kang, she's supported a lot of female sports over the past couple of years and a lot of women's sports research, which is really cool. So that donation was, we were all so grateful.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([16:56](#)):

Yeah, I think increasing the visibility is so huge. I've been really inspired as a mom whenever I've seen athletes who are parents posting up about the ways that they've incorporated childcare or nursing or balancing their training and the things that happened pre and postpartum is just really important to give visibility to that and to normalize it and to call sponsors out or other folks out if they're not creating that supportive environment.

Sarah Levy ([17:26](#)):

It's really cool to see more donors like that for specifically women's sports because I think people are recognizing it as a growing market and fun. So many people talk about, my teammates have such amazing personalities and they're just fun to watch. And I think people are starting to see that a little bit more now,

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([17:48](#)):

Even if folks are never going to make it to the Olympics, I think that there has been such a positive shift in our culture overall about making sure that you're exercising and taking care of yourself for health and accounting for those things that particularly impact women or might limit them from paying attention to their health and their bodies as they go through different periods of life is really huge. I would love to talk with you about the Olympics. So first I'm just really curious to hear a little bit about the lead up to the Olympics and your journey to the Olympics because I think that for so many people, every two years or every four years, they turn on the TV and the Great Olympics theme, music is playing and they get to see all of the sights and sounds and enjoy the spectacle of it or maybe even have the chance to attend some of it in person, but there's a lot that happens in those intervening years, the work that's being put in to get you to that place. So I'd love to hear a little bit about what got you to the Olympics when you knew you had qualified and you were going and what that was like for you.

Sarah Levy ([18:52](#)):

This was actually very tumultuous for me. I got invited out a little before Tokyo. They had just postponed the Olympics, but that would mean that we had a three year lead up to Paris instead of the usual four

years. So they wanted to bring people in a little earlier to have that extra year to prepare. So I was in the training group to the side of the Olympic team going into Tokyo, and then we got brought in at the beginning of the Paris 2024 cycle. So I was training here full time since 2020, and so I was making selections for that first season and then I had just a tiny injury and I was out for maybe three or four months, but after that it was really hard to get back up on the team. So we have roster selections pretty much every month, and I wasn't getting better.

[\(19:49\)](#):

Well, I was getting better, but not the rate that I needed to be getting better. I was in full-time physical therapy school at the same time, and I noticed that I was burning out a bit. I was approaching rugby as somewhat of an obligation, getting what I needed to get done and then going to school and trying to use all the rest of my brain power I had to go to school. So by last summer, I had completed a good amount of the course load that I wanted to complete and knew I wanted to take a little bit of a break from school to give myself the best shot at the Olympics. We have a roster of 23 and they bring 12 to be on the Olympic team, and I was really low on that list. I only got a contract for three months, so I had three months to prove myself, and I had a discussion with my coach.

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

I knew that in those three months I had to just give everything I possibly had. And that included just everything outside of training I was doing. I was studying film, I was watching literally every single thing, making extra meetings with my coaches to just be like, is this good? Is this not good? I was counting calories. I was in bed by nine every night, stretching every night, doing extra skills with my dad, all these things that I could check off every day to prove to myself that I did something a little bit better. So I got my contract extended and then I had a step-by-step process. I was like, get my contract extended, make a tour for the first time in forever, and then they cut down the team from 23 to 16, so then make that and then make the Olympic roster. But when I made those steps, I was like, there's no way.

[\(21:28\)](#):

There's no way I'm going to make every single one of these. But I was just looking at, okay, get my contract extended so I can stay here. After the new year, I made my first tour and I performed pretty well and made every single one after that. Some of them I performed better than others, and there were times where I was like, oh no, if I don't do well, this one I'm not going to get selected again. And then that's it. Because I told myself, once you don't get selected, it's harder to get back up there again. But yeah, after that first one I made in January, I just made every single one. But it was a battle every single time. Every single time I stepped on the field, I knew this is life or death pretty much then made it to Olympics.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([22:13](#)):

Wow, I'm so inspired and anyone should and would be inspired by that commitment, and you knew if you do this and this and this, then you could get there. So just to be able to break that down, but to beat those odds and to come onto the team, just amazing. We're talking about other models that you have, what a role model for anyone else who wants to try to achieve in their discipline, in their fields. That's awesome. So tell us about what it was like to be in Paris and to be in the Olympics.

Sarah Levy ([22:46](#)):

Yeah, I think I was the most excited to be in the Olympic Village. I love the Olympics. I love watching all these incredible athletes and to know that I was going to be living in the same dorm rooms pretty much as, especially these American athletes, that it's the pinnacle of sports. It was just so cool to walk in that

first day and we were there with the gymnasts and it was just like, oh my gosh, we're getting all the same gear as them. This is so cool just to be around not only people I looked up to, but people who also live similar lives to us. Where you wake up, you just think of your sport and you're doing that every day. It was just cool to be in that kind of environment where everyone prioritized the same things. When we got there, our coaches made it so that we'd have two days off.

[\(23:34\)](#):

When we got to the Olympic Village, we had a big training week, then we got to the Olympic Village, and then we just got to explore and soak it all in, which I was really appreciative of because that first night I could not sleep. I don't know if it was the cardboard beds or something, but I was just so riled up. I was just thinking, this is so cool. It was just an amazing experience. We were living in a little apartment-style dorm rooms, so that was fun as well because usually we're in a hotel room with just your roommate. So it was cool to be in that kind of environment with my teammates. Also, just seeing how Paris put on the Olympics was they just did such a good job. The volunteers were all so nice and so helpful. And then the Olympic Village, they really built its own walkable city.

[\(24:20\)](#):

It looked like a college campus. Every single building had different flags, and that was so cool to see all of these countries all in one place. And then, yeah, Paris in general, it was even when I was going to watch games or go to events after being on the metro and you see a big crowd of Germany fans, it was just a really uniting place. Even though everyone's from different countries, it just felt really united by sport, and I thought that was especially cool, just especially with how the world is right now. You don't see a lot of that of people just being people to each other and with no politics or anything.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([25:03](#)):

This was a really difficult year in the world and continues to be a difficult time. I'm just curious, what was it like for you? What did you go in expecting and what was the experience like showing up at the Olympics with all of that going on in the backdrop? And if there's anything in particular that you're thinking about or would reflect on related to coming in as someone connected to your Jewish identity, I'd love to hear about that as well too.

Sarah Levy ([25:32](#)):

Well, our sports psychologist says that you have to prepare for everything when it comes to the Olympics because if you don't think of something that will be the wrench in everything. So I was definitely thinking of what could happen, of what political statements could be done, and I felt lucky that I was a part of a team and also a little bit more of a low profile player, especially I think that with my last name, I know that people who are Jewish will know that I'm Jewish and possibly people who aren't. So I know that I am a representation of the Jewish community anytime someone sees my name, which is a blessing for sure, because I love being able to proudly say that I'm Jewish. But definitely I was a little worried and a little anxious going into it knowing that the Olympics is a hotspot for political statements or political things to come up.

[\(26:30\)](#):

I talked for a while with my sports psych about it. He was so understanding. He's such a great man, and he gave me tips of how I could divert questions and also just how it might feel to be at the Olympic Village, and if I saw Israeli athletes, if I saw Palestinian athletes, if I saw anything happening and I was really prepared for anything. And honestly, it was just the best experience that there was nothing that happened and I just felt everyone was just so united and it just felt like such a welcoming, we were all

part of one community there, and I don't know anyone else's experiences, but I didn't face any antisemitism. I felt that it really truly was about sports. Everything was about sports. Even if everything else was happening in the world, we were there enjoying our sport and just being an athlete and representing our country.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([27:29](#)):

Yeah, wow. You prepared for what might've been, and you are aware of it, conscious of it that you both represent the Jewish community, proudly so as you said. And also that everyone was there to focus on sports and focus on the purpose and message of the Olympics of being together, and maybe even a hint at that vision of what the world could be like if we were able to move past those divisions and for everyone to be able to come together as they do during that brief time period in the Olympics. Thinking about Queen Esther and that moment where she steps up just for this moment to save her people to be the one in the right place at the right time, perhaps that is a way into asking you to reflect on one or two awesome moments from when you're actually playing there and from your matches that you had and what it was like in that part of the time, and maybe one time when you needed to step up for your team.

Sarah Levy ([28:34](#)):

Our first game, we played Japan, and it was a battle to get there, and I started in that first game. And I think everyone's emotions were just high, everyone, especially people who hadn't gone to an Olympics yet. So all those of us, first time Olympians, I think the adrenaline was high. It was completely sold out. It was 70,000 people out there. Your heart's just pumping so fast. And we ran out onto the field. I was like, oh, that was really tiring because that was the hardest run I've ever done. And then we started playing, and Japan's a hard team. They're always working hard. They're there to outwork you. They don't make many mistakes, and they actually scored on us first. So right off the bat, they scored on us. In your head, you're just thinking, oh, we're at the Olympics. We have to win. We have to win this game.

([29:30](#)):

And I remember the ball was on the other side of the field, and I was hearing Sammy on my outside. She was telling me when I got the ball that I was going to try to beat my defender pretty much. I was doing it in order to try to set her up. And then eventually she told me to just keep going, and I just broke through the line and I ran the whole field and scored that first try. And I remember it was right over on the touchdown zone. In the tri zone, they had the Olympic rings. And the day before we had done a walk of the stadium. And I remember looking at those exact ones, it was exactly the corner that we went in. And I was like, oh, that'd be so cool to score a try right there. And then I just did it.

([30:12](#)):

And I was like, wait, what that happened? And it just, all the emotions of the past year, once we got that first try out of the way, it just felt natural. It felt like playing rugby again. And then everything after that just felt like playing rugby. That was a really cool buildup. And then that was what I needed to just be brought back down to. This is the sport that we play all the time. And then obviously it all lead up to the last even crazier incredible moment where Spiff scored that game-winning, try for the bronze match. So I think those two bookends for me were really the top moments in the Paris Olympics.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([30:58](#)):

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 at Just For This podcast. You can also follow Women

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