

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 Delia Ephron.

([00:56](#)):

What is the story that you are uniquely able to share with the world? How might your personal story be universal in such a way that it speaks the truth to those who hear it? When I asked my guest today, Delia Ephron, about a time when she stepped up to lead when like Queen Esther, she was uniquely positioned to do so, she was unequivocal. She told me that writing and sharing her current Broadway play, *Left on Tenth*, is her just for this moment, based on her memoir of the same name, the story focuses on her own struggle with leukemia after losing both her sister, Nora, and her husband to cancer. At the same time, she ends up falling in love with someone over email, very similar to her most famous movie screenwriting credit, *You've Got Mail*. Ephron shared with us about the notes and letters she has received after telling her story in *Left on Tenth*, messages from people who were inspired to choose joy and life when they might have chosen fear. That's the theme of our whole conversation, how to embrace the moment, the life you have before you, how to write and share and claim your own story and to never let anyone hold you back. Delia Ephron is a bestselling author and screenwriter. We began our conversation with me asking her to introduce herself and tell us a little bit about her family.

Delia Ephron ([02:26](#)):

Writing's a kind of a calling. It's a very difficult thing to start, but I think of it as hard, then habit then love, and it's a very grounding force in my life. I come from a family of writers. I have three sisters. They're all writers. I have parents who are writers. They were screenwriters, and my mother was very ahead of her time as a woman in the fifties. She was a screenwriter in Hollywood and she wanted her daughters to have careers. She was fanatic about it. I mean, it was really the main message in our family was grow up, have a career, leave Los Angeles, go to New York, and have a career. And she didn't say "Be a writer." She didn't say that. Although we read poetry at dinner and things like that. She didn't say that, but it was an unspoken message in the family. And every time I said something funny, my dad shouted, "That's a great line. Write it down." And when I said something that would be a title, he'd say, "That's a great title. Write it down." And I've had titles in my life before I knew what they went with. My most recent play, my play that's on Broadway now, *Left on Tenth*. I had that title for 10 years before I knew where it went. So I was raised to be this and I am.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([03:44](#)):

I love hearing sort of how people's families and upbringing shaped how they came to be and how it brought you to be in this moment. And I would love it if you could tell us a little bit more on Jewish identity and if that was an influence either growing up or if that is something that still exists as a part of your identity, upbringing, background, today.

Delia Ephron ([04:10](#)):

In *Left on Tenth*, which is my play, which is a memoir about the recent years of my life, I say that my parents were Jewish whose religion was left wing politics. I grew up in a very unreligious household, but

we valued all the values of Jews. Of course, we had bagels and lox every Sunday, and that was part of being a writer, our humor. But my mother said religion is the cause of all wars. She was very against organized religion, and she sent me to school on Jewish holidays. But were we Jews? We embrace the Jewish culture in every way possible. Little thing about being Jewish, there's different ways to be Jewish.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([04:55](#)):

Oh, absolutely. And I think some of the cultural elements, I was enjoying rewatching You've Got Mail not too long ago, and there's so many just sort of cultural elements that whether they're on Upper West Side elements, whether they're Jewish cultural elements that are really present in that and I know in a lot of other pieces of your work. I would love it also, you mentioned a little bit about your parents and about your mom and your family, do you have any other role models or people that paved the path for you or that you look to either personally or in your professional work?

Delia Ephron ([05:32](#)):

My girlfriends are my models for a living, their generosity, their kindness, their humor. We're writers. We all help each other out. We're like this crew. We've been together for years and years now, and I would say that they're my tribe in life and they're my advisors and they read all my work and I read all their work. And we're just, it's been years now, and I think of them as my role models as well as my besties.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([06:07](#)):

I love that. I think that there's often sort of the picture of the solitary writer holed up somewhere and really sort of focused and internal on all of their work. And I love to write also, and I'm a total extrovert, so any chance that I get, I'm figuring out how to make writing a social activity. So I think that's really wonderful to hear that you have that focus and that group and people who can keep you grounded in that way.

Delia Ephron ([06:35](#)):

I'm absolutely introverted and it is my favorite place to be alone in a room, but well, my girlfriends Dina's, definitely introverted. Julia's less introverted, but it's part of a writer's life to being alone with your own thoughts and everything. So I does think it attracts introverts.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([06:55](#)):

Something that I was thinking about and wanted to talk with you about, especially with the theme of this podcast being loosely based on the story of Purim and Esther's story as a role model, is Purim is this holiday in some ways and similar to Halloween, but with a different basis of putting on a costume or concealing your identity. And I'm always curious when I talk to folks who write really close to life, whether that ends up kind of in the personal memoir category or through fiction, how do you know if you're picking up things that either are close to you or that happened to you or you imagined? If you want to tell something through fiction or tell the truth through nonfiction?

Delia Ephron ([07:47](#)):

I mean, my mother said this thing to me when I was young. Oh, if you want to be a writer, write a letter and take off the salutation. I don't know why I remember that. I don't remember the very many things my mother said to me, but I really remember that because I think what she was saying is keep it simple

and keep it true to your voice. And everyone has a voice as a writer. And I don't mean it's how you write the sentence, although it's also that, it's what you see as a story, what you see in life as something worth telling. And then the gift of being a writer is to say, okay, I think that is this. I think this is a movie. I think this is a book. I think it's a novel. It's a nonfiction. I mean, for me, when I started writing, okay, I just married the first man who asked me and moved to Rhode Island when I was about 25.

[\(08:35\)](#):

Okay. I didn't realize that life had a beginning and an end. You know what I mean? I didn't really realize anything. You couldn't blow your twenties and have a life. I am proof of this. And when I got to be about 28, I sold a book on crocheting. I didn't think I wanted to be a writer, but I had a crochet business with a girlfriend. And I went to a party in New York and just out of the blue, I said to an editor there, "I know you'd never be interested in this." I mean, is that pathetic? I mean, never present yourself that way. I know you'd never be interested in this, but would you like a book about crocheting? And he said, "Yes." Which is to me, one of the most astonishing things that ever happened to me in life. So I wrote a book about crocheting, which was just directions with my best girlfriend then who was an illustrator.

[\(09:24\)](#):

So she illustrated it. And I'm writing this and I'm thinking, I didn't think this was writing. I was just writing directions. But I thought, well, I think I want to be a writer. And that's a big thing to admit a dream. So I said it out loud to my then husband and he said, I don't want you to be a writer. And I said, why? And he said, suppose you become famous. I don't want you to become famous. And I said, I promise I won't be famous. Is that the saddest thing you have ever heard? No, not the saddest for sure, but it's up there. Anyway, I knew I had to leave him. Obviously, if someone wants to crush your dreams with this big fat foot, get out. And I don't care who that person is in your family or your friend or your lover or whatever.

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

Don't let that person in your life. So I knew I had to leave and I went to New York to the arms of my girlfriends, and I gave myself, I had enough money to last two years and I thought I have to be a writer in two years. So then I looked around, I mean, I got really serious about it. I was now 30, and I thought, okay, I got to get published in the New York Times. That's the only thing that's going to make anyone notice me. So I was almost two years later, well, was it two years or a year later? I was down to, I don't know, \$500 or something, and I was eating chocolate pudding and I realized I was eating it the way I had as a child. And I thought, huh, I'm eating like a child. And I wrote a piece, 500 words about how children eat food.

[\(11:01\)](#):

It's called, "How to Eat Like a Child." And I sold it to the New York Times and I was given a book contract the next day. It was a sensation, the piece was, it just struck a chord. I don't think I've ever written anything that struck a chord quite the way "How to Eat Like a Child" did. And there I was, I was in business, and that's when I really went to pieces. That's when I had to teach myself, okay, now you got to sit down two hours every day, two hours in the afternoon. That's when life got serious. But after that, I just thought every year, I think this year I'd like to learn to write an essay. And really it took me a year to really figure that one out. And then another year I would think, well, I think I'd like to write a novel. And then that was even harder. And then another year my sister was wanting to be a director and she wanted a collaborator. And so, okay, here's screenwriting. You have to craft your own course of action as a writer. And for me, it was trying to master all sorts of things, which is why my play now is so meaningful to me because it was the one thing, okay, here I am. It is like, okay,

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([12:11](#)):

Thank you for sharing all that. And just, I love the idea of having to craft your own path and really set it out in that way. I like to ask my guests about how they see themselves, and it's fun to always ask this about writers. I really love to take a look at the Bible through a literary lens. So do a character analysis of Queen Esther who inspires our podcast. And she's such a fascinating character for so many reasons, because she gets to this really high level of leadership, pretty much the highest place that a woman could be at in her ancient society. But she also has so many barriers, so many roadblocks and obstacles when she steps up into her moment of leadership to save all the Jewish people, because she's the only one in the position to do it, she still does it at total risk to her own life. So I'm really fascinated and wondering if you have any examples either from your path and your career or maybe from a character that you've been interested or written who kind of gets to that high point of leadership but still faces so many barriers. And I think that that's a story that I know is echoing for folks in this moment too, of women reaching a certain level, but still facing barriers and challenges.

Delia Ephron ([13:35](#)):

Well, I mean, if you look at the politics of this country right now, I mean, we were fighting for things in the seventies and sixties that we thought we got. Now they're all in danger. I feel spun around like a top. It's terribly, terribly difficult to negotiate where this country is right now and where women in this country, what women actually want in this country. I'm very confused by it all. I feel very fortunate that I live through more progressive times and was able to craft a path that way. I feel grateful that I had all that direction. My mother was a very difficult person. She died of alcoholism. She was terrible, terrible drunk, but she gave me and all my sisters incredible sense of drive and sense of identity, and I'm very grateful for that because I think that women themselves are stripping their own identities away right now. And I don't know what to say except people have to get more political, I suppose. I mean, you're young and ambitious and that's a path for you.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([14:43](#)):

Yeah, I think that folks are thinking about how from the seat that they're in and the role that they play, how can they contribute and step up in that particular way? For sure.

Delia Ephron ([14:56](#)):

In my play, *Left on Tenth*, which is the story of losing my husband and then falling madly in love in my seventies and then getting struck by a terrible disease, by leukemia, and it's a question of whether I have the bravery to go through a bone marrow transplant, which my odds were very low on survival. It's about hope and taking chances. One of the things my doctor said to me was that people going into the appointment changing their lives because they're getting braver to take chances with medicine, with their good doctors. And I felt like I was able to put that into the world for other women. It's just been hugely important to me as a writer that I was able to craft this play and have my doctors say that to me, that their patients are coming in altered from seeing it, that people are coming in with a sense of joy about life and the whole idea of the place is totality and that we have these moments in life where we have to go for the joy.

([16:02](#)):

We have to realize there's going to be pain, that life is all that stuff, and being frightened of it isn't helpful. Being frightened of it is natural, but it's not the way to go. And that was presented to me personally by one falling in love again, which was scary because I was just focusing on how sad I was and I'd lost my husband instead of thinking of the joy I would get from being in love. So that pain can

overtake joy and you don't want that to be true. And that's what I feel like Left on Tenth, my play, is all about. So I've been thinking a lot about what you're talking about.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([16:45](#)):

That's beautiful. I think that whether it's in our personal lives or the way that folks are reflecting on, interacting with, our world and with our society, then that's a really optimistic view in some ways of saying you could sit in the pain and in the mud and in the challenge, or you can choose joy and you can have that option and that opportunity to live and to think and to be in that way. I would love it if you could talk a little bit about collaborating with your family members. You mentioned collaborating with your sister. What was that like to work together on projects? And if there's any story that comes to mind, I'd love to hear it.

Delia Ephron ([17:35](#)):

There's this moment in a screenwriter's life where you either are going to be a director, you're going to be unhappy. Because screenwriters are fired, and screenwriters write scripts, and then directors may or may not really get what wanted on that screen because the movie is a movie, it's not writing. And Nora had written that marvelous movie, "When Harry Met Sally," and she had the opportunity to become a director, and she's a very extroverted person. It's a very, it's like the most perfect job for her in the world. And she had a book that was about two sisters. And so she said to me, would I collaborate with her because it was perfectly suited to our gifts together. And it was very odd because our parents were screenwriters and now we're screenwriters. It's like, good grief. We haven't moved anywhere from all things square. But the first movie was so much fun because we really didn't know what we were doing.

([18:31](#)):

I mean, we knew how to write the screenplay, but then we were shooting it. It is a low budget movie. We were all in the same hotel in Toronto, and we were just laughing and challenged and it was wonderful. And then we began this collaborations together. I mean, I really wanted to write books. I wanted my own stories told, and I knew if I wrote with my sister, I wouldn't have my own stories told. I had stories to tell. I had my own voice. So I very carefully began to craft a book career at the same time, because I own the copyright on a book. If somebody makes it into a movie and I don't like it, the book is there. It is to protect my stories. And so while she was charging ahead as a director and writer, I was crafting a career in books as well and in essays. So we worked together, but we also kept separate paths as well. And that was good because first of all, she was my older sister, so she'd been bossing me around my entire life. And so I needed my own voice and my own world as well. And I knew that, and we were very close, we were great pals, and I just miss her.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([19:47](#)):

Yeah. Thank you so much for sharing all that. And I know that your play also captures some of that as well too.

Delia Ephron ([19:54](#)):

Yeah, it does. We had the same disease and there were possibilities for me that weren't there for her. And we didn't exactly have the same disease. We had the same disease in diagnosis, but not actually under a microscope. So that also affects whether you can be treated for it in certain ways, but it was very odd and sad and frightening because we were twinnny.

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

The core question that I ask folks is from the moment when Esther has become queen, and she is the only person who really has the ability to step up to lead, to make an impact and to make a difference, and in fact, her Uncle Mordecai comes to her and he says, who knows? Maybe it's just for this moment that you're in this position of leadership, and I'm wondering if you've had a moment like that, if there's been a time where you feel like you've been in the right place at the right time through your voice or your platform or your talents to step up and to lead.

Delia Ephron ([20:59](#)):

Yeah, I think right now, I think with this play, which is about trying to have the nerve to get through the loss of someone you love and finding the bravery to fall in love again, and then later in life we've all battled or had friends or relatives who've battled diseases and then just having the nerve to go through that, I could take this story and make it universal and put it out there. I've gotten the most incredible mail from people about their lives and these things that happened to me that were gifts that I could give to other people.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([21:36](#)):

Is there one story or letter that stands out of someone who reached out to you about that impact?

Delia Ephron ([21:42](#)):

They're all, I went there and I lost my husband, or my husband battled this disease and he survived or he didn't, and now I've fallen in love again. Or you're giving me the bravery to think that I have a future. I have the same doctor, and I don't think she wears those kind of shoes. And you know what? Almost every kind of letter that you could imagine that it strikes home. It's a community of people that have written me, that have lived through this time and are finding, I mean, this is a really, it's a really funny play and it's a joyful play, but it's also just full. It's a rollercoaster of emotions, and that's what this time of life is. My character says we're in the fragile zone and that is where we're living now. And so Left on Tenth is about getting through the fragile zone.

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

And I think that sense of resilience and overcoming grief and challenge, but sometimes that's very hard to find that from within. So having someone else share the story is what someone needs. And you've been able to leverage both your talents, but also the platform that you have in order to support people in that way.

Delia Ephron ([23:03](#)):

Yeah, I mean, listen, the important thing is that you have a story to tell as a writer. And if you know, have a story to tell it, you just tell it the best way you can. But in this case, I feel like I was giving a very universal story. I think any story written well can be universal, but this is very specifically about taking chances in life.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([23:24](#)):

Do you have any advice or suggestions for folks who might want to pursue writing?

Delia Ephron ([23:31](#)):

All I really think is write from your heart. If you want to be a writer, find your stories to tell, find what your voice is as a writer, what you see in the world and everything. The actual business of becoming a writer, it's rougher than it's ever been, I believe. Being young is a great advantage and I don't have real knowledge about how you get agents or get noticed or any of that. I mean, for me, the trick has always been being somewhere like the New York Times so that your voice, I mean, that is where I sold my first piece and I got a book contract off it. I hear that if you can get into Modern Love, your voice is heard. There are books on how to get agents, and there are books about how to get editors, and I would just read them and see.

[\(24:19\)](#):

Also, I'll tell you what else. If your work is anything like someone else's work, which almost everyone's work is like someone else's work. Alright, is it memoir? Is it mystery? Is it whatever? Look in the back of those books at the acknowledgements and see who they thank. And if they thank their agent, maybe that's the agent for you. So then you write the agent a letter and you send the first 15 pages of your book. Believe me, anyone can tell whether a person can write off the first 15 pages of a book, probably off the first two, you're going to get a million rejections. It's rough. It's rough out there. The book business is a bunch of complainers. I mean, it's just hard. People aren't buying books, and the movie business is in a very, but don't get stopped by how bad the world is. Just imagine that you have stories to tell and people want to hear them and work from your heart is my main advice.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([25:19](#)):

I love that stories to tell and people want to hear them. I think that whether someone is trying to work directly in the field of writing or just share their own story, their own narrative, then that's certainly, those are words to live by

Delia Ephron ([25:34](#)):

Being a writer is a good life. So I wish everyone the best of luck in attaining it because I think it's a wonderful way to live.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([25:50](#)):

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 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.