

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 Shelly Tal Meron.

([00:57](#)):

Shelly Tal Meron is an Israeli politician. She's currently serving as a member of Knesset, that's the Israeli parliament from the Yesh Atid Party. She has been outspoken in her support for Israel as a democracy, and she is a tireless advocate for women and for the families, for those who have been held hostage in Gaza for over one year now. Like Queen Esther, from her position of leadership, she continues to speak up and speak out. While the situation is complex and changing every day, today, we demand with full voice for the hostages to come home and for everyone to live in safety and in peace so that we might return in earnest to the work of protecting democracy, religious freedom, and gender equity in Israel and throughout the world.

Shelly Tal Meron ([01:48](#)):

I'm a mother of two girls. That's a very important fact. My oldest daughter is 18, she's about to enlist to the army in one month, and another girl is 14 years old. I think I spent my entire life raising my two daughters to become decent human beings. I think that's probably one of the most important things I'll ever do. I served in the Israeli army for seven years. I was a captain in the Israeli Air Force and I was an ops officer, and I had different roles and I was a spokesperson for the Israeli Air Force. And after I finished my service, I went to reserve for many, many years, even after my children were born. And I think it's a big part of my personality, my identity. As you know in Israel, you go to the army when you're 18 and it's embedded within you, it becomes a part of you.

([02:46](#)):

And after that, I had an entire career in high tech. I was a business development manager in Southeast Asia, and I would do international business with the US and Europe and Asia. I think always when I had my career, I would always fight. I was an activist. I would fight for women's rights, I would fight for children, I would fight for different causes. And I had the honor and a lot of luck to become an Israeli member of the Knesset almost two years ago. I think it's such an honor and such a privilege, and I don't take it for granted that I'm able to influence millions and millions of civilians here in Israel. Before the war, I would fight for women's rights. I'm a member of the women's right committee at the Knesset and a member of the finance committee. And I would fight alongside human rights organizations, women organizations, UN Women, Me Too, different organizations. And when the war started, I was so disappointed because as an advocate for women, we felt so alone with what has happened to us. It's been 427 days since this war started, and we still have 101 hostages in Gaza among them 13 women.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([04:10](#)):

So tell us, what has your work looked like for the past over 400 days?

Shelly Tal Meron ([04:15](#)):

Most of my work the past year has to do of course, with the hostages and the sexual violence that went on on October 7th and unfortunately is going on right now in Gaza with our hostages. By the way, it's

not only women, it's mainly women, but it's not only women. And we should talk about that too. I think the first month when the war started, everything was very chaotic. We were in complete shock. The entire nation was in deep sorrow and grieving, and we didn't exactly know what was happening. It was a horrible feeling. But very early on, I understood that horrific things happened to our women on October 7th, and we started getting all the evidence and the testimonies when it came to the sexual assault. I felt that it's my life mission to help with the hostages and talk about the sexual assault that went on because for me, this is a new form of terror. This is using sexual assault as war weapons. This is of course against the Geneva Convention, and this did not happen only in Israel. When you had conflict areas, you see sexual assault happening - in Ukraine, with the Yazidi women, and in different areas around the world. But it's the first time in Israel that we ever had something like this happen to us.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([05:40](#)):

So what did you do? How did you take action?

Shelly Tal Meron ([05:43](#)):

Immediately I started issuing letters to these organizations and I signed all the women members of the Knesset on these letters, and I sent them out and I tried to speak to different organizations around the world so they would at least condemn Hamas for sexually assaulting our women and raping them and abusing them and mutilating them. But no one responded to my letters. They completely ignored my letters, and we felt so alone. We felt so betrayed. People simply don't know what happened on October 7th. They have no idea because the narrative changed very, very quickly. Maybe two or three days after October 7th, the narrative shifted to what's happening in Gaza, only what's happening in Gaza. And we had thousands of terrorists invade our borders. They burned alive entire families. They butchered them, they mutilated them, they abused them, they executed them one in front of the other truly horrific stories.

([06:47](#)):

And the world was talking only about what was happening in Gaza. And this hypocrisy drove me crazy. I was traveling the world and speaking about these subjects and trying to bring awareness to what truly happened on October 7th and also to our hostages. My work has to do with that. And I just want to add one more thing because I think it's crucial. During the war when I travel to Paris, I met with the Minister for Gender Equality in France. She's a young feminist. She's no longer the minister now because there has been changes in France. And when I sat with her, I told her, listen, we need to form a global coalition of women parliamentarians from around the world to acknowledge the sexual assault as war weapons because this is something that has to do with the entire world. And this is not only a threat to Israel. It's happening right now in Israel, but tomorrow it's at the doorstep of the entire world.

([07:46](#)):

And she agreed. And together we established this global coalition, and we had the first assembly here at the Knesset, which was truly a historical event because it's an international coalition. It's not only for Israel, Hamas, it's for women who go through this around the world. And we had over 160 representatives from around the world attend this assembly and ambassadors from countries that were against us during the war. And so this coalition is truly important for me, and I try to speak about it everywhere I go. And hopefully we'll have another assembly in Paris next time to continue our work because we want to legislate and we want to bring the terrorist to justice in both local courts, but also international courts.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([08:34](#)):

Thank you both for sharing all of that and also for the incredible work that you're doing and for continuing to raise up your voice. I'm a Hebrew speaker. So in the early days of the war, I was looking both at Hebrew, Israeli media and also just accounts from friends or friends of friends who were at the Nova who were on the Kibbutzim and Women of Reform Judaism were speaking out very early about the gender-based violence before it had been taken up or even considered by some of the mainstream media. And because we know that when women say that they have been attacked and abused and raped, then we believe them. We believe their stories and we lift them up. So for me, it's been also really painful for these past 14 months to see that as soon as we put something out there, we write a piece, one of the hostages speaks up, those who are sharing their stories, there immediately folks try to take them down.

([09:40](#)):

And it doesn't have to be at the expense of one person's pain or another. I share what you also said about having the appropriate level of critique and protest of the government. Prior to October 7th, our North American advocates together with our Israeli Reform and Progressive Movement there in Israel, we were part of the protest movement that was speaking out about the really challenging and dangerous judicial reforms. So we can speak out about that, but it can't be at the expense of women's lives, women's safety, and women's stories, and the stories of all people who are victim of conflict because there's no way to understand it or construe it, I think, except for an anti-Israel and anti-Jewish, antisemitic attitude.

Shelly Tal Meron ([10:35](#)):

Absolutely. I agree completely. And I remember that there was a piece in the New York Times a few months after the war started with the woman in the black dress, which was so important. And for me, I know all the stories from what happened on that day because I'm very close to the families of the hostages and this is my work, so I speak to them on a daily basis. But this woman, for me, it was very personal because I saw the video that was going around of the woman in the black dress, and she's a mother of two kids, young kids, and she went to the Nova Festival with her husband and she was raped in front of him, and then she was murdered. He was murdered as well. And these two boys remained orphans without parents. And for me, the fact that the legacy of this woman was this video that will forever be a digital asset, right?

([11:35](#)):

It goes around everywhere and you cannot stop that. For me, it was horrific that this is her legacy. And this piece was so important because it was a personal story, but it was so important for the State of Israel for people to understand what happened here. And it's only one example, and I've heard and saw so many testimonies of young people who were at the Nova Festival and were witnessing these horrific acts. Most of the women who went through this are no longer alive, and they have no voice. So I feel like we have to be their voice. We have to speak on behalf of them and let the truth come out. The political situation in Israel is very complex. I won't say anything different. Before the war, it was horrible. We had the judicial reform here, we had the protest, we were torn apart within our own country.

([12:32](#)):

I'm sure it had some contribution to what happened to us. And still with all the differences of opinions that I have with this government and their policies and the things that they're doing, my country is more important for me than anything else. And seeing what's happening around the world right now when it comes to Israel is truly painful. You see all the antisemitism that's going on in the world in campuses, but

not only in campuses. And by the way, not only of course in the US in campuses, also in Europe and other places, and you see crimes being committed against Jews everywhere. And you even had a few instances where they took women in France as hostages. They raped them as revenge for what happened in Gaza. That is outrageous. It's horrific. And therefore what I said in the beginning, this is a problem for the entire world.

[\(13:27\)](#):

This is not only a problem for Israel and this is a new form of terror and we should consider this as a national security threat. And when you consider it as a national security threat, the whole environment reacts differently to this subject. These days where there is a talk about maybe there will be a hostage deal, which is for me, the biggest dream ever. I hate calling it a deal because this is not a business deal. It's not a real estate deal. We're not buying a car. But it's so important, and I know that the administration in the US with all the changes that are happening, my true dream, I can put the politics aside and say, this is my biggest dream for these people to go back to their loved ones. Unfortunately, many of them are no longer alive, but the ones that are still alive, we have to save them. We have to save these lives. And the 13 girls, we know that some of them are still alive. Most of them are supposed to be alive. I hope they are. And the thought of them being there for 14 months and maybe having babies in Gaza, truly who can imagine that? And I pray and pray and pray that that is not the situation, but we won't know until they come back to us.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([14:46](#)):

Let's talk for another moment about the hostages and the situation. You mentioned that you set up the lobby for the hostage families and have been a leader and an advocate there. And each and every day we say time is running out and we so hope and pray for them to come home and to be with their families. Tell us more about as much as you can about where that deal sits. We're recording our conversation quite close to when this episode will come out, even though we know the situation is changing on a daily basis. So what are you seeing? What are you hearing and what are you doing right now?

Shelly Tal Meron ([15:29](#)):

Well, I sat in so many studios for interviews and there was a deal. It was almost there that happened so many times that I don't even say it anymore. I hope, I pray for that to happen, but I'm not sure what's going to happen. I think that for me, the top goal of this war should have been first and foremost releasing the hostages before anything else. Yes, of course the national security of the state of Israel is important for me. Of course it is. It's important for everybody in Israel and everybody wants Hamas to be eradicated and Hezbollah as well. These are terror organizations. These are not countries or entities that you're supposed to negotiate with. So of course I want national security to be back, but I think for our nation, for our future, for our rehabilitation, there won't be a victory if we don't have the hostages come back.

[\(16:26\)](#):

Unfortunately, I think that there is politics getting in the way when it comes to the hostage deal. I wish the Prime Minister would prove me wrong right now and say, "I'm bringing them back home." And when people ask me, "but what about the price that you have to pay?" And I tell them, "listen, what is a price tag for a human life? Can you put a price tag on your child's life? Can you say this is the right price or the wrong price?" Nobody can put a price on human lives. And I think on October 7th, we failed these people. The basic contract between a state and its civilians is first and foremost to protect them, to give

them security. And we failed to do so on October 7th. And so right now, we have to redeem ourselves. We have to save these people and bring them back home.

[\(17:21\)](#):

Now, the Prime Minister has said in his speeches the last week that the time has come and the conditions are better now to create a deal. And I'm praying and hoping that that is the situation, but it's very fragile because we've seen up north that already Hezbollah has fired at Israel, even though there is a ceasefire and everything is very fragile and delicate and everything influences the other issue. Hezbollah influences Gaza. Even though we tried separating the two, it influences one another. And so I think we've achieved so many military achievements during the last year. Truly, I salute and I adore the IDF. They have done an amazing job and we've had such success with the operations. But right now, after all these achievements, we need the main achievement to come, and that is a deal. And so the Prime Minister and also President-elect Trump is talking about a deal before he comes to office in January.

[\(18:26\)](#):

And I truly hope that the Prime Minister will do the right thing and do this deal immediately because every day that goes by, they are dying there. It's winter time here, it's cold. Their health is horrible. Nobody has visited them from the Red Cross. Nobody really knows their condition. We don't even have a list from Hamas. We don't know who's alive and who's not alive other than from our intelligence. We don't have information. And when the world speaks about humanitarian aid, it drives me crazy because there are hundreds of trucks going into Gaza with humanitarian aids for civilians in Gaza, which of course I don't want to harm any civilian, but where is the humanitarian aid for our hostages? They are human beings as well, and they're being starved to death. They have no sanitary conditions. They're under the ground. They hardly have oxygen, water, food, and their situation is horrible.

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

And just yesterday we received a note about one of our soldiers who's a US citizen, Omer Neutra, that unfortunately was murdered on October 7th, but they're holding his body. Just think about his family. It's been 426 days that they were hoping their son is alive. They didn't know such a horrific situation. And so every day that passes by, they're dying. And we've seen some hostages that died throughout this year during their captivity. The biggest achievement of releasing hostages was through a deal. The hostages that were released from a military operation were very few people, of course, amazing operations. We salute the army, but to bring back 101 people, we need a deal, and I'm hoping he will do it.

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

Thank you for your really moral clarity on that and the outspoken way that you're speaking up and making sure that their stories are heard. The theme of the podcast, the name of our podcast Just For This, comes from the Book of Esther, from the moment where she's been hiding her identity because she is concerned about being a public Jew. She's been advised not to be Jewish and to be the queen, really the most significant woman in leadership at that time that women could reach. And then there's this moment when all of the Jewish people of Persia are at risk and Mordecai comes to her and says, מי יודע, הזה לרגע רק זה אולי יודע, Who knows? It's maybe just for this moment, you're in a position of leadership. So I know that the war and the current situation is so present for everyone. So perhaps this is the moment for you, but I'd like to ask all of my guests if there's been a moment where you have stepped up like Esther because you've been in the right place at the right time.

Shelly Tal Meron ([21:33](#)):

Wow, that's a great question. First of all, I lived in the US for two years. My mom is American. And so I know the American culture from my mother. And when I lived in the US, I felt very, very safe. And I didn't feel like being Jewish was a problem. But I have a lot of friends who live outside of Israel right now, both in the US and of course in Europe and other areas around the world, even in Asia. And people are afraid. People are afraid to be Jewish outside of the country of Israel. And that is unacceptable. It's unthinkable, it's despicable. And it brings us to dark days in history. It brings our memory back to the second world war and very dark times in our history. And when we said never again after the Holocaust, I think we meant it. Unfortunately this happened to us on October 7th, but the state of Israel should not allow this to happen around the world, and we need to get involved in that.

([22:35](#)):

I don't think that the state of Israel is doing enough when it comes to, let's call it the public opinion of Jews around the world. We need to do more and we need to tell the Israeli story, the right story, the beautiful story of Israelis and Jewish people because there is a lot of ignorance going around the world. And the young generation is very influenced from TikTok and social media, and they're watching videos of 20 seconds, and they're sure that they know everything about the Israeli Palestinian conflict. And it's so much more complicated than that. And I've met so many people who were chanting, "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" and they have no idea which river, which sea, and what's the situation in Israel. So when it comes to our international affairs, we need to invest more. That is my opinion.

([23:22](#)):

And I've been advocating and doing public diplomacy for the past year, and I have some sense of what's happening. But I want to give you an example of something that happened to me during this war that gave me hope. I went to a convention in Geneva, it's called the IPU. It's an international assembly of members of parliament from around the world. And there were over 150 delegations from around the world, from everywhere around the world. And they were trying to do some sort of a bill against Israel there. And we were fighting this. And I went to this convention together with a member of the Knesset from the Likud party, which is the Prime Minister's party and from the coalition. And he went and spoke at the assembly hall the first day, and we had hundreds and hundreds of parliament members from around the world listen to him.

([24:15](#)):

And he was very militant. And he spoke about what's happening, and he was trying to, in his way, he was trying to fight for the country of Israel and they were booing him and they were screaming and they were shouting and they were leaving the assembly hall. And I sat there and I had tears in my eyes, not because I felt sorry for him. I felt sorry for my country and for my people that we have come to this situation where we had countries that are our allies from Europe, scream horrific things at us, genocide, et cetera. It took me like an hour to get myself together. The next morning, this member of the Knesset asked me if I would like to speak at the assembly hall. And I said, of course I do. And the day before when I sat at the assembly hall around me, behind me was the Palestinian delegation.

([25:11](#)):

In front of me was the delegation from Iraq, Iran. I was surrounded by enemies, let's call it that. Next to me, I had the delegation from Ireland, which was very against Israel at that time. And he told me, do you want to speak? And I said yes. And I called the ambassador of Israel there and I said, I need you to print out the pictures of our women hostages. And within an hour I prepared a speech and I went up to speak and I was sure it was going to be horrific the same way it was the day before. And I held up the pictures of our women hostages and I said their names. And I told the assembly hall, I said, I'm here to remind

you that they are still there. They are in Gaza, and they're being raped and abused and starved and different, horrific things are done to them just because they're Jewish women, just because they're Israeli women.

[\(26:12\)](#):

And I spoke about the morality of things and the fact that the world needs to wake up and the world needs to have moral clarity and how to separate right from wrong. And this is the simple truth that we need to release these women and all the hostages. And I spoke about the Middle East and I spoke about the future, and I spoke about the responsibility of Iran. It was before Iran attacked us, by the way. And I spoke about the Abraham Accords and the possibility of having peace one day with our neighbors and living one next to the other peacefully. And everybody was completely silent. Nobody interrupted me, nobody screamed at me. Nobody left beside the Iranian delegation. And when I finished my speech, they were clapping and some of the delegations came up to me and we exchanged cards. And it's not because I'm talented, it's because I gave them a perspective first of all, of a woman, of a mother.

[\(27:15\)](#):

I spoke the truth. I spoke morality, I spoke about the hostages. And I think that it gave them a different perspective of what Israel is and what Israelis are like. And that gave me a lot of hope, that experience. And I take that with me everywhere I go, because I think we have the power to make a change. I think we have to speak up and use our voices to speak the truth and to speak about what's the right thing to do. And I will forever remember that moment. It goes with me everywhere. And I'm not afraid to voice my opinion, even if it's a hostile crowd, I'm there and I'm saying my truth. And I think that it can be done. We can fix some of the things that are happening in our relations between our country and other countries. It's going to take a lot of work and a plan, a strategy, but it is possible I think.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([28:11](#)):

That is such a powerful, just for this Esther moment, because you were speaking up in a hostile environment, and I think that it's easier or more folks would be comfortable speaking up in a place that's a friendly crowd, but you found a way after seeing how challenging it had been on the prior day to give a human face to share the humanity of the hostages and to share your own story and your own humanity. And it sounds like that was what enabled the situation to be transformed through your understanding of that was the way to convey the message.

Shelly Tal Meron ([28:53](#)):

Yes, I think you're describing it exactly like it was, and it gave me a lot of energy to continue with my work. And I felt like I was doing something for these families that are waiting for their loved ones. I felt like I was on the right side of history of trying to speak the truth to the world, and hopefully I'll have more opportunities to continue and do so, but I hope they'll be back home really soon. And I won't have to speak about that. Maybe I'll speak about other things that we need to fix, but I hope the hostages at least will be back home in general. I just want to say sometimes women don't feel like they have enough strength to sound their voice. And I think that is one of the things that I talk to my daughters all the time about, and I say to them, you have to speak up. You have to speak your voice. You have to speak your truth. You have to feel worthy, you have to feel equal. You have to be at the decision-making table because many times women are not at the decision making table, at least not enough. And you should feel worthy that you can do it and you deserve to do it and you'll do a great job. So that is one of the messages that I try to convey to my daughters when it comes to that.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([30:19](#)):

Yeah, actually that's exactly what I wanted to ask you about next. I do think that a fascinating piece of Esther as a model for us is that she reaches that high level of leadership, but she's so limited, right? We were talking about you speaking in front of a hostile or non-welcoming crowd, and in order to save the Jewish people, Esther has to go before her husband. But because of royal protocol and rules and the patriarchal society that she was living in, she did so at risk of her life. So we have this difficult situation where women can reach a high level of leadership and authority, but there are also so many barriers and limits to what they can achieve. It's something that's live for us in the US as we think about women and the heights, but also limits of their leadership. And I'm wondering if you have faced barriers on your journey to become a member of Knesset, to become a political leader and a voice throughout the world, and if not thinking about barriers, is there someone who helped to pave the path for you and to invite you into leadership?

Shelly Tal Meron ([31:36](#)):

Well, first of all, I think that as a woman, you go basically as a human being, but mostly as a woman. I'm not the same as I was when I was in my twenties, right? You grow as a person and you understand things differently now because I had a career before I came to politics, and I found myself many, many times around tables in Asia where I was the only woman at the table. So I had a lot of experience with that. Also, I had experiences where there were women CEOs, very successful women. So I had both experiences. But I think that I'm very privileged because my party, Yesh Atid, is all for women. And we make it a point that women are a part of everything and we make sure that we have at least 40% women everywhere. So we make it a point that this happens.

([32:32](#)):

It's not by chance. But when I look at the Israeli Knesset right now, our situation is far from being the way it should be. We have, I think 28 out of 120 members of the Knesset. And we don't have a lot of women ministers in the government and also in the security cabinet. We don't have women at all. And that is a huge issue for me because when you talk about our hostages and the women getting raped, you need a woman to sit down at that table and give you the perspective of women. You cannot speak about women without having women at the table. So we still have a long way to go. And I think that there's, unfortunately, we thought maybe we thought as a society that by the year 2024, everything's going to be easy for us and equal. But we are seeing that we are far from that and we have to fight for that, and we still have to do a lot of work so that women are everywhere and they feel that they can accomplish everything and they believe in themselves. But I try to speak about the women perspective of things everywhere I go with all the work that I do, even if it doesn't have to do with women issues within legislation committees, everything that I do in my work, I always try to make it a point. And I try to encourage women wherever I go, to believe in themselves, first and foremost, to believe in themselves and their abilities to do whatever they dream about, whatever they want.

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

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.