Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch (00:45):

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 Rabbi Sharon Brous.

(00:56):

Tell me about your heart. So invites Rabbi Sharon Brous, my guest for today's episode, our final conversation on season two of Just For This. Tell me about your heart, she says. Each and every guest on this season has shared their story with us. Each of them has opened up her heart. Tell me about your heart. Is it broken? Is it upside down? Are you worried and afraid or maybe you are feeling cautiously optimistic or even brave? Tell me about your heart. Our guests have opened their hearts about antisemitism, about mental health, reproductive rights, parenthood identity, and even vegetarian cooking. Many guests have reflected on the choice to be publicly Jewish in this challenging moment. Tell me about your heart. They are not hiding. They are not silent. Their hearts are open wide. As Rabbi Brous reflects, the stories that we have been telling are broken stories and we have a moral mandate to tell a new story. Our hearts and our stories may be broken and still each of us has the opportunity to lead by telling a new story by speaking with a brave full heart. Inspired by Esther, inspired by our guests, may each of us speak a new story. May we step up just for this moment and may we tell each other what is in our hearts.

Rabbi Sharon Brous (02:59):

I'm a rabbi in Los Angeles. Actually grew up on the East coast in New Jersey, at Temple B'nai Jeshurun on South Orange Ave. And I was JFTY Social Action Vice President back in the day. So those are my roots. And then lived in New York for 12 years and came out to Los Angeles in the early two thousands. And I just met so many really interesting creative wise young Jews who were desperately searching for a way to connect to each other and to some meaning in their lives and not really looking in institutional spaces to find it. And we started IKAR in the spring of 2004. The goal was really to answer two distinct questions. One was how can we mine our Jewish tradition to live lives of purpose and meaning? And the second was, who are we called to be as Jews and human beings in a time of moral crisis? I wanted to build a community that stood at the intersection of those two questions. It didn't matter to me if people were Reform or Conservative or Orthodox, Reconstructionist, never been in shul in their lives. I wanted people in the room who were deeply invested in answering those two questions. And so we launched the community in the spring of 2004 and it's been 20 years and a great joy and really one of the great blessings of my life to be the rabbi of this community.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch (04:24):

I'll ask you a question that I often get asked and feel free to turn it around afterwards if you'd like. Did you always know you were going to be a rabbi or was there a moment or was it more of a process, a build for you?

Rabbi Sharon Brous (04:38):

I was going to be a civil rights attorney, and I was so certain about that that I started doing internships in high school as a very directed kid. But I really felt that I wanted to be a person who would help use the

law to make the world more just and to help people who were most vulnerable to abuse and exploitation in our society. And I told you I was JFTY Social Action Vice President, so that fits right. When I was in college, I had a series of really kind of humiliating Jewish experiences, my first year in college. I would walk into Jewish environments and was kind of confronted with my own ignorance and illiteracy Jewishly. And it was very painful because I had such a strong Jewish identity. But I realized that I didn't have the basic tools to be in a robust Jewish conversation.

(05:33):

And so I was always the person who would walk into Friday night services right at the moment that everybody would stand up and lecha dodi and turn around and face the door right as I would walk in, I would stand when people would sit, I would talk when we were supposed to be silent. I did everything kind of upside down. And then I had one particularly humiliating Jewish experience where it was clear that I didn't know the rules. I brought something to a Shabbos dinner. It wasn't hechshered, it didn't have rabbinic certification on it. The host really was inappropriately angry at me and really humiliated me. And I walked away. I am like, I'm done with Judaism. I can actually be a cultural Jew and not have to be in any religious environment. And I was like that for a while. I was in school in New York City, so it was easy to just read the New Yorker and eat bagels and drink coffee and feel very Jewish.

(06:25):

And then there was a series of attacks, one in particular in Argentina, a terrorist attack. And I just felt my Jewish heart broken and I was so confused by it because I was this universalist and I cared about the world and I cared about humanity. I was a be civil rights attorney, and why did I feel so deeply connected to the people who had lost their lives and in a country I didn't know related to a country that I had never been to. And I didn't really know much about Israel at all. And in the course of kind of grieving and exploring that, I realized that as a cultural Jew, I also needed basic Jewish literacy. And so I started to do this quest, essentially like a spirit quest in New York City. I got a list from my future mother-in-law. There was a cute boy who lived across the hall in my dorm who grew up at Camp Ramah.

(07:20):

And his mother was a Jewish educator. And I actually called her and said, I need help. I need to find a synagogue where I can learn. And she wrote out a list of every single synagogue in New York City and I started to go to every single one of them. And I left most of them crying because I felt like nobody said hello. Nobody ever said what page we were on. I didn't know the proper place to sit. It just felt like I was an outsider to my own Jewish community. And then finally through this journey over the course of really a year, I realized that there was a Jewish life that I felt really drawn to. It was B'nai Jeshurun on the Upper West Side. I walked in and was just completely swept up in the music, in the moral seriousness of the way that the rabbi spoke.

(08:04):

And I thought, I have to go to Jerusalem so I can learn enough to know what my grandparents rejected. My grandparents are very Jewish but not religious. I have to learn enough to really understand my own inheritance. And when I went to Jerusalem, I studied Talmud for the first time and I just fell in love with our tradition. And I called my parents at one point during that semester and I said, after having this kind of epiphany at an Aish Hatorah Orthodox outreach weekend in the old city where I had this realization that I wanted to become a rabbi, and I called my parents and said, I'm going to be a rabbi. And my parents, they were shocked. I remember they said, I thought you said you wanted to do something good for the world, and it was heartbreaking. And I'm like, no, this is how I'm going to do something good for world.

(08:55):

I realized that most of the agents of social change who I admired most in the world were people who had a faith narrative. They were people who were committed to the transformation of our society because they believed that something better was possible in this world. And I was like that. And I had to take them on this journey with me to sort of understand how our faith could actually be a mechanism for helping us understand who we're called to be in the world. And of course, ultimately my parents nod too long after became my greatest cheerleaders and really were very excited about the journey, but their initial reaction shows the contrast between how I grew up and what I ultimately decided to do.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch (09:36):

Oh my goodness, I can answer that question. And also there are so many things that I want to ask you about based on what you just shared. For me, it was really process of, I grew up in a small town in the Boston area, which is a thick Jewish community, but I was in a small town that didn't have a strong Jewish community, didn't have a lot of Jewish friends immediately in the school that I attended. So for me, connecting with my Jewish identity and Jewish community was always going to somewhere. Sometimes it was just to our Reform synagogue that I grew up at a town and a half over, and sometimes it was going much further going to youth group events or to the summer camp that I grew up at or going to Israel in high school and being there. So it was always about finding a community that might be temporary and that lived more in time than rooted in a particular place.

(10:39):

And looking to initially access that for myself and then realize that I could have a hand in creating that for people too, whether it was by pulling out a guitar and we were having Havdalah in the lounge of a Hillel where we transformed that into sacred space or then now in the role that I'm honored to sit in where we bring together hundreds of folks for conferences and gatherings, that's not one place that's rooted there, but to see the transformative power and the way that we really live in that sacred time and what that does and means for people when they get to be together. I wanted to ask you based on what you shared, I hear echoes this current moment in your experience of seeing something happen on the news in South America and then with a connection to Israel in what I know that some folks in some congregations Jewish communities are experiencing of people saying, I feel a connection, or I feel a challenge or a struggle or a pain to what's going on in the world beyond me.

(11:51):

And I've really been sort of reading and viewing this through the lens of people are either struggling with or embracing or wrestling with really kind of redefining peoplehood for this moment and wanting to find a place to connect with that. So I'm curious if you see a through line from that experience that you described to some of what you're seeing in your own community, in your own congregation and beyond. And then I also, I wanted to ask you sort of having had those experiences of showing up at the doorstep of different congregations or communities or in college and feeling sort of out of place, fish out of water, not knowing the practices, customs, all those things, how have you taken that as your experience and translated that into the way that the ethos of IKAR and the way that you welcome people in?

Rabbi Sharon Brous (12:42):

I'll answer your second question first. I really do think now in retrospect, as painful as it was for me to to feel like an outsider in my own community, that was very, very hard. Because my sense of Jewish identity was so profound and the mismatch between me and every Jewish community was so real. But that I realized pretty quickly became kind of my superpower because I really understood what it felt like to be on the margins of my own community and to walk in and sit in the back and have nobody talk to

you and not even know if you have a seat at the table. And now I can see as the person who's in the front of the room or in the center of the room, how important it is that we really build our spaces to be fully welcoming and loving, not just inclusive, but radically loving and welcoming of the people who feel most marginalized in our community, whether because of their identity, maybe they're LGBTQ, maybe they're Jews of color, maybe they're divorced, maybe they're single.

(13:46):

We hear about different demographics in our Jewish community who just say, I don't feel that there's a home for me in my own Jewish space, or people who hold differing perspectives on some of the most important moral questions of our time. And they just feel like, is there even a place for me in the Jewish community? I was a person who felt that way for my own reasons. And I felt ultimately that feeling like such an outlier actually gave me a kind of perspective that I wouldn't trade for anything in the world. And I'm so drawn to the story of Rahav, the prostitute who lives in the walls of the city, and I gave a sermon once about being an edger. These are people who live at the edge and so they're not deep on the inside. And so they're able to criticize, they're able to hold a critique of the inside in ways that people who are deeply entrenched often can't see what's happening, but they're also not on the outside.

(14:38):

So they're able to see what's coming toward them and how we should all strive to be edgers. I think it was Rabbi Arthur Waskow who came up with this phrasing many, many years ago. And I was so taken by it and I felt like I'm an edger in some way. I don't see things the way, I don't toe the party line either this party or that party. And that's helped me a lot in terms of building a kind of nonbinary space that can hold complexities, which is particularly critical in this post-October 7th reality that we're living in now. So that's my answer to the first question. As painful as that journey was, I wouldn't trade it for anything because I feel like it helped me understand even we don't affiliate with a movement. I grew up Reform. My parents were Reconstructionists. I went to a Conservative seminary.

(15:25):

It was Orthodoxy that inspired me to Judaism. I want to be with people who are asking critical questions about what it means to be a Jew in the world today. It doesn't matter to me if you're the dean of the Reform seminary or if you're a modern Orthodox or if you've never been to shul before. So I want to be with kind of edgers and outliers people who are asking questions and aren't so rooted in the story as it is, but instead able to sort of expand our consciousness and imagination to make space for the story as it could be. So that relates back to your first question, I think, which is the way that asking these questions about identity, that there might be a through line to the questions that so many people are asking in this post-October 7th moment. If I understood your question correctly, I gave a sermon shortly after October 7th about of Avram Ha'Ivri the first time that Abraham is called to Hebrew in the Torah.

(16:25):

It is after his nephew, his estranged nephew, Lot is abducted. That's the first time that he's actually called Hebrew. He's all these other things before that. He's a husband, he's a businessman, he's a traveler, he's a son, he's a brother. But he becomes a Hebrew the moment that his estranged family member has his life jeopardized. And I feel like so many Jews around the world felt like something shifted in their Jewish identity on October 7th or after they, they felt a kind of awakening of familial connection or disconnection that made them feel like, I have to ask these questions out loud now I need to pursue a deeper understanding of this. And what I concluded in that sermon was that what does it mean to be an ivri? What does it mean to be a Hebrew? Avram understood that he had two obligations. One, he would go to the ends of the earth to get back his estranged nephew, Lot.

(17:26):

He would never give up until Lot was home. And two, he never slept again. Avram never slept again because he was terrified for the rest of his life that he might've taken the life of one innocent in the righteous pursuit of the return of his hostage nephew Lot. And that in some way taking on this identity like feeling to understand our Jewish identity in the wake of catastrophe. It's not just an open question. Our Torah actually gives us two answers here of what it means to be a Jew. One is you care about your family, you don't ever give up on your family. And two, it's not okay to instrumentalize another human being's life in the pursuit of justice for your own family. And we can never lose sight of that kind of sensitivity and compassion and grace and awareness of the humanity, even of the people who stand in the way of us retrieving our own beloved hostages. So that for me has become a really powerful awareness that really crystallized for me in the wake of October 7th.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch (18:34):

This moment since October 7th, 2023, this time period has been immensely challenging and complex on so many levels for so many different people, for many different reasons. And I'm wondering if there's one story or maybe two because of the level of complexity and nuance to the experiences that folks are having that illustrates how you've been caring for your community in this time or how some of the challenges and friction have come up and how you've been able to sort of continue in a covenantal way within a community going forward and continuing forward.

Rabbi Sharon Brous (19:19):

I had the very strange coincidence of my book coming out just a couple months after October 7th. So I closed the manuscript almost a full year before. It takes a long time in the production and the book came out into a world that I could never have imagined. And I found that the wisdom of the rabbis, which I am lifting up in the book, was more relevant and more meaningful and more urgent than even when I had written it a year before. And so I was in this strange position as we all were. We were trying to figure out what is the Torah of this moment? How do you hold the complexity, the sense of vulnerability, of trauma, of fear, of grief, of anguish, the complexity of loving our Jewish family and also feeling deeply alienated from many of the most dominant voices in our Jewish community in this moment, including voices for me from the Israeli government being deeply anguished about all of the human suffering, not only of our own family, but also of Palestinian civilians in Gaza.

(20:30):

What's the Torah of that? How do we hold that? And here I felt so grateful that I had just invested years of my life in the analysis of one particular Torah approach that was exactly what I needed for this moment. And so to answer your question, the mishna that is at the heart of my book is the Torah that I needed to bring to my community and needed to really embody with my community. And then as I traveled around with the book, I wasn't just sort of sharing the ideas of the book, I was sharing this Torah as a way of helping us hold the complexities of this time. The mishna that's at the heart of the book is from midot, it's Mishna midot tutu. So the mishna is compendium of Jewish law codified around the year two 20 ce. For folks who are listening who haven't learned misna, this is a fairly obscure one that talks about an ancient ritual at the Temple Mount when Jews used to come 2000 years ago from all across the land, and they would ascend to Jerusalem and ascend the steps of Har habayit of the Temple Mount, and they would enter through this giant arch entryway and they would turn to the right and circle around the perimeter of the courtyard of the temple mount, hundreds of thousands of people at once.

(21:47):

And then they would leave just the way they came in except the mishna says mishna Ero d'var, someone to whom something had happened, someone with a broken heart. And those people would also go up to Jerusalem and they would go up the steps and they would go through the same entryway, but they would turn to the left. They would circle clockwise when everyone else was circling counterclockwise, and they would have this sacred encounter in which the people who are okay that day would look into the eyes of the people who were broken and bereft and bereaved and they would see each other. And the people who were coming from the right would ask this really simple question, Malach in the Hebrew, which means what happened to you? Tell me about your heart. And the folks who are brokenhearted would say, I'm just devastated. I'm devastated by this loss.

(22:38):

I can't sleep at night. I'm having nightmares. My cousin's friend was abducted, my father just died. I found a lump. I am worried about my child. Whatever the pain was that was in their heart, they would respond. And then the people who were coming from the other direction would offer a blessing, a simple blessing, may you be held with love as you navigate this time. And then they'd walk on. And I realized in the heart of the book is really that the power of this ritual is that none of the parties who are involved in this ritual actually want to be because when we're not okay, when we're brokenhearted and bereft and bereaved and Ill, the last thing we even want to do is show up in a place where the whole world is walking in one direction and we're walking in the other. And yet we do.

(23:26):

We're called to show up there and not to pretend that we're like everyone else because we're not. We have to visibly show that we're not okay, which just takes so much courage. And the people who are okay that day, they have to learn that even though they thought they came there for the spiritual purpose of pilgrimage and circling, they're actually there to see a stranger, to see someone who is not okay, and to peel away from the incredible profound spiritual movement around that space and actually sit down quietly with someone and say, tell me about your broken heart. And then give them a blessing. And the power of that turning toward, I hear this whisper from our rabbis 2000 years ago saying, it's exactly at the moment that you want to pull away, that you have to turn toward. And so I brought that to my community and I mean, I shared the idea, but also I told them, let's get up and do this.

(24:24):

And literally, I mean this is my one story, my long answer to your short question, which is the night that we launched the book in the community, we had like 700 people in the room and I asked them to all get up. And if they were okay that night, none of us are really okay. But if they felt like they had some strength in them to go to this wall and start to circle this way, and if they were like me, if their hearts were shattered because my father had just died October 7th, there was so much pain that they should go to this wall. And about 650 people went to the right and about 50 people went to the left. And we enacted this ritual and it was so profound, and I felt like I was trying to teach the community that we have the ability to look into each other's eyes and say, tell me about you.

(25:14):

We have the ability to speak honestly and vulnerably when we're not okay and share it knowing that we'll be met with tenderness and with love, and we have the ability to bless each other because at the end of the day, those hundreds of thousands of people who went up to Har HaBayit, to the Temple Mount, they did not go there to get blessed by the kohanim, by the priest, or by the rabbis. They went there to get blessed by each other and to give blessings to each other. So I wanted to remind us that we

have these tools and hopefully that has some kind of reverberate impact on the way that we engage one another.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch (25:48):

I love that teaching. I love that text, and I didn't know that you had really done the physical embodied ritual in your community. It's amazing to picture that even having not been there and to imagine it and what that must have felt like and been like. And I love the aspect that as a rabbi, as clergy, as a spiritual leader, you can be the source for the access to taking a piece of text, a piece of Torah, and bringing that to people, sharing it with them and helping them to use it as a lens for their life. And then ultimately, you can't be the one to look into everyone's eyes. They have to be participating in that process of giving care and being in community together. And so in so many ways, I think that that's a beautiful illustration, not just of the immediate message or the way that folks are reacting or responding in this current moment in time, but also how to convene a community that is rooted in its leadership and also cares deeply for each other.

Rabbi Sharon Brous (26:56):

Yes, exactly. Exactly. And after it was done, one of my rabbis who is in the room said, wow, this ritual has not been enacted for 2000 years. It was one of those movies where Raiders of the Lost Ark, something's happening that's very old. And he said, we just did something that our ancestors did, and you could sort of feel the power of it. And I felt it as a mourner, I felt the power of having strangers ask me, tell about your heart and being able to share with them and be vulnerable with them and receive their blessing because it's really hard to do that. I mean, it's hard on all sides. I mean, one of the other pieces that I've been thinking and writing a lot about is how hard it is for rabbis and caregivers and therapists and teachers and doctors and hospice workers and to receive love like we who are trained to constantly be walking to the right.

(27:53):

Even when our hearts are broken, we're still taking care of other people. What does it mean for us to be taken care of a little bit because we need that too, and there's only so much pain that you can take into your own system. We have to be able to let others hold us. And so I actually felt that I experienced it, and I will say, Liz, I mean now many times since that launch, I've done that with groups around the boardroom table, in the classroom. People don't even have to get up. I had a group of students in a university and there were 15 students around the table. And I said, the way I want you to introduce yourselves is I want somebody at the room to say Malach to someone else. Tell me about your heart. And then you'll introduce yourself by sharing how your heart is, and then you'll respond by giving them a blessing, and then they'll turn it and ask someone else. This is a very powerful ancient ritual that's both a metaphor, but also in some ways a script reminding us that we have the power and the capacity to be present for each other with compassion and with curiosity, especially in the hardest of moments.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch (28:57):

Amazing. We've been speaking all throughout our conversation already about taking text and Torah and using it as a lens for our lives and rooting our actions, our behaviors, or interpreting our lives through that lens and really letting it shape where we show up, how we show up, and to give meaning and understanding. And I also think to connect us to something that is ancient, but also has really is eternal and timeless in that way too. So the podcast is based on a line from the book of Esther where Esther has been hiding her Jewish identity but has been the Queen, and she's been hiding it because it's been perhaps dangerous for her to be publicly Jewish. Something the story of Esther, it's so rich, right? With

so many elements that are relevant for us now because it's a diaspora story. That's why I often find that it's interesting to talk about. She gets to this point where she is the one who is in a position to do something about the risk and the threat to the Jewish community and to her people and to her community and loved ones, and she's in the right place at the right time.

(30:16):

Mordechai says to her, who knows? Maybe it's just for this moment, you find yourself in a position of leadership, and I have absolutely delighted in getting to ask all of my guests. What is that just for this moment for you to be yourself through the lens of Esther, of being in the right place at the right time, stepping up to lead for folks like you who have founded an organization, an institution. It may be that a lot of folks have reflected on sort of this current moment in Jewish time that I'm just curious if there's been a moment like that for you where you can read yourself into Esther's story.

Rabbi Sharon Brous (30:56):

Yeah, I've thought a lot about that pasuk over the course of this year. I have a friend who said to me a few months ago, she said, man, you're a hell of a wartime rabbi. I kept thinking about that. What does it mean to be a wartime rabbi? I'm so grateful that I have the pulpit that I have and the platform that I have with a community that really wants to be uncomfortable, wants to hold complexity, wants to hear sermons that they don't agree with sometimes, and wants to experience and encounter torah through a lens of moral leadership today, because I have an opportunity to say things that I think would be hard to be said in other places and other pulpits. My team of rabbis, we all have that advantage in a way that we can say what we really believe needs to be said here.

(31:47):

And so what I've really tried to do in the course of the last year, as I said before, is kind of break the false binary of our time and complicate narratives and tell a different story. I landed in Tel Aviv in the summer on July 1st, right before this incredible event started in Tel Aviv at the arena where every single seat was packed. 6,000 people for a peace gathering of Israeli and Palestinian peacebuilders, literally standing shoulder to shoulder, telling the stories of the death of their loved ones, of having been Israeli Jews who had been held hostage in Gaza, some whose families were still there, people who had lost their loved ones on October 7th who had been murdered, and Palestinians who lost their entire family line in unis or whose family members had been killed by Jewish religious extremists in the West Bank. And they stood side by side, shoulder to shoulder, and they said, there is another way, we have to move toward peace.

(32:48):

And I felt like if these folks who are most proximate to the pain could envision a different way, we diaspora Jews, we American Jews, have to be really thoughtful and serious about which stories we're amplifying and how we share those stories. And I feel, I mean, for such a time as this, I feel like I am in a position right now where I can help encourage us to tell a different story. The story that we have been telling is a broken story that our story about America, our story about Israel, our story about the Jewish people, about the Palestinians, these are broken narratives and I believe that we have a moral mandate to tell a new story. And I also feel grateful that I have an opportunity every time I stand up to speak or talk on a podcast, or go onto a stage, that I have the opportunity to tell a different story and to be a part of that movement of transformation, the seeds of which we really see planted all over right now, and hopefully in the coming years, which will come to fruition.

(33:51):

We have to constantly generate the hope through our actions. As Maoz Inon says, he's an Israeli peace builder now who both of his parents were murdered on October 7th, and he says, hope is a verb. My version of that is hope is a spiritual practice, but it's action. It's not just I'm sitting here feeling hopeful. I can't. You can't. If you're awake in the world and you're reading the paper, you can't feel hopeful unless you create the practice of hope as a driver for our continued work of trying to build a more just and loving society, which I think is exactly what we're called to do in these times.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch (34:34):

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.