

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([00:43](#)):

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 Dana Bash.

([00:57](#)):

Welcome back to Just For This. It's amazing to begin our third season together. This season, we'll continue to share stories of inspiring women, those who step up, who think deeply, who lead boldly. Our season begins the week of Purim, the holiday that shapes the theme for our podcast. Each week, I invite our guests to read themselves into the Purim story, to see themselves reflected in Esther's struggles and triumphs, to the challenges and the opportunities that she faces. Our season begins at a difficult, heartbreaking moment in North America and around the world. Just a few weeks ago, I was in Israel when the bodies of Oded Lifshitz and Shiri, Ariel, and Kfir Bibas were returned to Israel for burial. Held hostage since October 7, 2023, their sorrows and struggles have reverberated around the world, echoing the pain, anger, and sorrow of the losses of that day, and the enduring struggles for all people living in the region.

([02:07](#)):

I was physically present in Israel in that painful moment and this season many of our guests will speak about our bifurcated, interconnected, inseparable, bound up together Jewish communities around the world. Other guests will comment on the struggles and challenges to our democracy, our rights, and our very bodies in the United States and beyond. We will open up our hearts, we'll open our minds to hear perspectives that compliment and challenge our own. Above all, even though it may be hidden or obscured, like Esther hiding her own identity, I will ask our guests for glints of hope, to share a moment of uplift, of comfort, a spark of light. At my core, I am an optimist, even when it's hard to find reasons to believe. These are the stories and teachings our guests will share. Our guest today, Dana Bash, brings her wisdom, leadership, and nuanced perspectives to our conversation and her work. She is CNN's chief political correspondent, anchor of Inside Politics, co-anchor of State of the Union. She's also a proud and public Reform Jew. We began our conversation with me asking her to tell us about her family and her background.

Dana Bash ([03:32](#)):

I grew up with a really strong Jewish identity, always within and inside the Reform Movement. My grandparents on my mom's side were European Jews, central European Jews, who left their respective countries of Hungary and Austria on the run, and they didn't get to the US until 1941. And then they settled in Chicago and immediately became involved in Reform Judaism. And back then Reform Judaism was really Reform Judaism, as you know, far better than I. And then they moved from the south side of Chicago to Skokie where my grandfather and a lot of other survivors and other Jews and very much a growing Jewish community in Skokie started a Reform temple that he was involved with throughout his life, throughout my mother and my aunt's childhood. And that was definitely a focal point of their life and their family, their traditions getting as my mother grew up.

([04:36](#)):

And then my mother had that kind of in her DNA, not just as somebody who went to worship, but somebody who went to learn intellectually and the text and really understanding from a spiritual point

of view, but also again from an intellectual point of view. That was the model that she had in my grandfather and she definitely continued that. So much so that when I was growing up, my mom had jobs outside of the Jewish world, but she always was very involved in our temples and our synagogues. And when my brother and I left home for college, she quit her job and said, okay, this is really what I want to be doing. And she went to Hebrew Union College and got her master's in Judaic Studies along with a lot of students who were going to be rabbis who are all my age. So when she graduated, it was kind of funny.

[\(05:32\)](#):

She was sort of like their mascot and I was seeing all these people who are my age graduating with my mom. In any event, so that is kind of the backdrop of my Jewish sensibility. It's not to say that growing up I was super into being Jewish on a day-to-day basis. I went to Jewish camp though, and like most people who went to Jewish camp that really did help me define my Judaism, it was then a UAHC camp now a URJ camp that my son goes to. As I've gotten older, which I think is kind of typical, I've started to feel more and more connected to the community spiritually, but in a community aspect and to my family roots. And I've always been proud to be Jewish, but I don't think I've ever been more proud to be Jewish than I am currently.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(06:24\)](#):

Thank you so much for sharing all that. I'm an HUC alum as well, but I wasn't in class with your mom. I am also a URJ camp alum, and my son now also goes to the URJ camp that I grew up at.

Dana Bash [\(06:38\)](#):

Which one?

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(06:39\)](#):

Eisner.

Dana Bash [\(06:40\)](#):

Oh, Eisner. Okay. We are Camp Harlam people.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(06:43\)](#):

Wonderful. Yeah, I have spent some time at Harlam as well too. And I think that the URJ camps are really special and I feel connected to them both personally and through the work that I do with WRJ, but also just camp and that total enclosed environment that creates the space for people to live in Jewish time and to feel comfortable and connected I think is so valuable and so important, especially as it passes through the generations.

Dana Bash [\(07:12\)](#):

Yeah, no question. And my mother went to a Jewish camp in Wisconsin. It used to be called Oconomowoc. What's it called now? It's called

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(07:18\)](#):

Oh, OSRUI, Yes.

Dana Bash ([07:20](#)):

Yes, yes. And she's in her late seventies and she is still friends with the people she met when she was 13, 14 years old.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([07:28](#)):

It endures and I think gives people a grounding in a very special kind of way. For sure. You were talking a little bit about coming into your Jewish identity and speaking immediately about it, and not just on a podcast where that's our focus and our orientation, but you've been quite public about your Jewish identity and connection to Jewish faith and to Jewish people in your public role. I'm wondering how has that shifted for you at all, and is there a story that comes to mind that illustrates that shift in these months and now heading into years since October 7th in this really challenging and difficult time period?

Dana Bash ([08:14](#)):

For me, it started before October 7th because I saw the rise in antisemitism in the U.S. and I was lucky enough and am lucky enough to work at a place where they let me work on a whole hour about the rise in antisemitism. And that was, again, I just want to emphasize, before October 7th. So it was very much something that I was looking at as a journalist and reporting on as a journalist, but it was obviously something that was very near and dear to my heart and very important to me to do. Again, before October 7th, I went to Auschwitz with Wolf Blitzer and we did a lot of reporting there, both some stories that we did for later sort of taped stories and live reports from Auschwitz in and around the 80th anniversary of the uprising of the Warsaw Ghetto. And so that was a really powerful moment and was probably among the first times that I talked a lot about my family history.

([09:22](#)):

And Wolf had done it before, but he did it even more so. And then of course, fast forward to 10/7, 2023, and look, the fact that I was able to be a part of the reporting team in and around that day, the days following, the weeks, the months, and again, as you said, the years I do feel lucky. I mean obviously it's hard, but it's hard for everybody. And I feel lucky that I am in a position where I can ask the tough questions when they need to be asked. I am in a position where I can help to remind people that there have been hostages left behind and talk to the parents and the siblings of those hostages and be somebody who can talk about the very, very complex situation in and around this region. And most importantly, when it comes to the effect that it is having on Jewish communities in the United States and around the world, which has been profound.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([10:29](#)):

I have traveled to Israel many times throughout my life and traveled there in February of 2024, leading a feminist mission there, and I spent time there again this winter. And I was so surprised that I met up with people that I've known for a long time, friends, people that I'm connected to, and I'd keep saying, it's good to be here to give you a hug to support you. And they said, but how are you doing? How are you doing in America? We're sitting here watching the news and seeing the rise in antisemitism. And for me, that was such a moment of feeling this different level of connection to Jews and people around the world because of that shared concern for the challenges that we're facing are different depending on where we live, what our roles are and our community, but that shared concern for each other when we're having different but complimentary challenges that are going on.

Dana Bash ([11:31](#)):

That is so telling. I mentioned that I did an hour in 2022, and then after October 7th we kind of rushed together an update to that hour, which unfortunately wasn't that hard to do because it was much easier to find stories of antisemitism. And I remember talking to a college student who is American and Israeli and was getting calls from his grandmother who was living very close to the border with Gaza in Israel who was calling saying that she's more worried about him on a college campus than she is for her own safety and the safety of her neighbors.

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

I think that a key piece of what you're able to do in your role is really to get into, as you were saying, that level of nuance about the situation. I think that in a lot of the forms of social media, things just get compressed and if people don't have the years, the decades of experience of knowledge and understanding coming into it, it can really seem like, alright, right and wrong. There's someone who's on one side, someone on the other side, and something that I've really appreciated about the coverage that you and others bring is just to explain the complexity, right? We're not living in one place where we can say, this is the bad guy, this is the good guy, and all of that going on. But I think that it's so hard for people to move past the sort of quick bullet points or quick meme or pieces around that. I'm wondering if that's something that you've run into or thought about in particular.

Dana Bash ([13:12](#)):

Yes. Social media is not a place for nuance, generally speaking. Yeah, I can say something as nuanced as possible, but things that I say are taken and twisted or clipped without the nuance, and then that becomes the thing that I said on social media or the thing that I meant on social media when that's not the case. So look, this is true of this issue, which is again, about the most complex on the globe, but it's also true of domestic politics. It's also true of name your issue. And so I think we just need to, as much as we can, tune out the noise. Sometimes it's easier for me to say than do but try to do it.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([13:57](#)):

We've been talking a little bit about the fact that you don't hide your Jewish identity. If we're going to our Esther analogy, she hides her identity for the first several chapters of the story until it's the moment where she needs to speak up. That's the environment that she's living in. I'm wondering if that's ever had a personal impact on you?

Dana Bash ([14:18](#)):

Sure. I mean since 10/7, the people who don't like Jews, I'm just going to say it bluntly. Yeah, I mean I wouldn't call it a challenge. I think it's more of a reality that might've been under the surface or not in vogue to do or say or not possible to say without people seeing your identity. Unlike with social media, people can say horrible, horrid things and they can hide behind a profile or a fake profile or whatever it is that doing. And so it's upsetting, but it's more of a reality. And honestly, I do think about Esther as a very sort of ancient example of somebody who had to hide their Jewish identity. But there's much more recent examples. Cousins of my family members who were in Europe during World War II, and they couldn't say that they were Jewish. My own grandfather had to, in order to get from Austria, where Kristallnacht had happened years earlier, through to Bratislava, through to Hungary, he had to pretend he wasn't Jewish and he had to figure out how to get there without papers. And so in that case, it was obviously about actual survival. In the case of Esther, it's about thriving and living in the culture and society in which you were born, but there have been variations of that since the Jews were kicked out of Jerusalem the first time and the first temple was destroyed. Right. Do I have that right, Rabbi?

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([15:48](#)):

Yes, yes, you've got it. It's interesting, right to draw that connection between your own family, who that's an immigration story, but to make that connection to Esther sort of learning how to live within the environment and the community that she's in.

Dana Bash ([16:04](#)):

That's literally why we still exist despite 5,000 years of persecution, of isolation, of everything that our people have gone through. The reason why we still exist as a people is because you do what you do to live and you make changes in your life in order to live. I mean, this is what we're seeing now. Our number one, please, you can probably cite all of the biblical references to what I'm going to say, but the most important thing as a Jew is life and living life and preserving your life. There are certainly other important mitzvot and other things that we're supposed to do, but to me that's like the pinnacle, and that means maybe sometimes you have to be a little bit of a, not necessarily a shapeshifter, but you have to figure out survival mechanisms. And you and me, we come from people who are able to do that, otherwise we wouldn't be here. I mean, the theory that Jews have a lot of anxiety, and the reason is because the Jews who are left are anxious because our grandmothers and their grandmothers and their grandmothers were anxious. And thank goodness because if they weren't, they wouldn't have left the shtetl. They wouldn't have left when the pogroms were happening. They would've stayed and they wouldn't exist.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([17:27](#)):

That's great. I don't know about the Jewish text on anxiety, but in terms of prioritizing life, that's the value of Pikuach Nefesh, of we value saving a life above all else and making sure that we can thrive and we choose life every day. That's among our highest values for sure. I want to ask you about another angle of the Esther story that's been fascinating me since I started thinking about her as a model for women's leadership and she becomes the queen of Persia. She has to hide her Jewish identity to make that happen, but she's selected in the beauty pageant and she becomes the queen, essentially the highest ranking woman in all of the land. So she gets to this incredible height of authority with being the queen and to this high level of leadership, but her power is also so limited. She has to risk her life to go before the king.

([18:29](#)):

She doesn't even know if he's going to let her in to speak with him unannounced. And that's sort of the drama of the story. And if you think about she's the queen, that's sort of the woman who's living in the highest point that a woman could get to in that ancient time. But I think it has such really interesting parallels for our current world. We just went through an election cycle where a woman was not elected to the highest office of the land. She was in the second highest office and could not break that glass ceiling. And I'm curious if either through the many really interesting leaders that you have had the chance to interview and speak with or perhaps through your own experience, if you could comment a little bit on that paradox of women reaching this height of leadership yet not being able to get to that highest level.

Dana Bash ([19:26](#)):

That's so interesting. I never thought of it that way. I mean, obviously as you said, those were ancient times and it wasn't just in Persia, it wasn't just the queen there. It was in France and in England and everywhere else the king ruled. But yeah, I mean women did not have rights even within their own

kingdom if they're the head of it, and in this case, it's even within their own family. That was true for millennia 'til somewhat recently. I mean, even in the United States, forget about the highest position in the land. When my mother was married, I'm not even sure she was allowed to get a credit card on her own. So I mean that's different from the way women obviously were treated a lot better than Queen Esther's time on a social level and in practice, the practice of the law, but the letter of the law was still very much all about men and women were not given a key role.

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

I don't know. I mean, I think that women still have a long way to go--that goes without saying. And I do think that a lot of women look at Kamala Harris and then Hillary Clinton before her and say, does this mean that Americans just are not ready for a woman leader? I don't know. I honestly don't know because the fact that each of them is woman is genuinely only one part of a very much larger picture that allowed them to run in the first place, but then ended up actually in both cases with Donald Trump beating them weirdly. But it's also about the times. It's about society, it's about culture, it's about the economy. It's about so many things. Their femaleness, their femininity, their womanhood is one of the things, but I don't know that it's *the* thing. Do you?

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([21:20](#)):

Yeah, I think that it's impossible to separate those pieces out, right? You can't say, well, if the only thing that was changed was this was a male identified candidate instead of a woman, I think you can't completely ever separate it out or it's just conjecture. I do think that I talk to a lot of folks in my family, friend circle and who I'm connected with through WRJ that were just really, really deflated after the election and felt like we're never going to elect a woman, and this is a referendum sort of on where we're at and the way that women can ascend in leadership, and that was sad and hard to think about.

Dana Bash ([22:04](#)):

Look, I get that. I really do get that same time you have had. I think it's also an America issue and not necessarily a gender worldwide issue. I mean, we are so far behind other, not just democracies, but other countries where you don't have the people electing the leaders in a free and fair way where women have been leaders many times over in the countries, whether it's Great Britain or it was really Margaret Thatcher who was the woman. The second one lasted about two days, I think, but right now in Mexico, Sheinbaum, she's going to go toe to toe with Donald Trump on his number one issue, which is immigration. And by the way, not only is she a woman, she's a Jewish woman.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([22:52](#)):

That'll be really interesting for sure. And the other piece of it is electing the best person for the role, but is there some piece that's holding people back?

Dana Bash ([23:02](#)):

The answer is of course. I mean there's so many. Even Nancy Pelosi, who is pretty much the strongest woman I've ever met will tell you that even now, I mean now she's not in leadership anymore, but when she was in leadership, the pinnacle,

[\(23:21\)](#):

She'd be in a meeting with all men and she would say, I think we should do X, and nobody would listen. And then it would be person talk, person talk, person talk, and then that maybe the fourth person would

say exactly what she said and everyone would say, that is such a good idea, and she's sitting there like okay, I'm two heartbeats away from the presidency. I said that thing and nobody paid attention. And there's one reason and one reason only because a woman, and I think that that is definitely a dynamic that if we said didn't exist, we would be fooling ourselves.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([23:58](#)):

I do think though that particular kind of circumstance where a female identified leader, speaker, individual on a team in a meeting offers something up and then it's taken over by the male identified colleague. I think that people are more aware of that dynamic, and I've noticed in particular, a lot of male colleagues of mine when I'm in meetings, make sure to say, as Liz said, as Rabbi Hirsch said, just to make sure they have become so much more educated about that dynamic, and I think that's hugely important. I'm wondering if you faced any barriers like that on your own journey to the role that you have, the seat that you hold, and if there's been anyone who helped to pave the way for you?

Dana Bash ([24:46](#)):

Not really. Not like the generation before me. I mean, I'll mention my mom again before, way before I was even born, and certainly before she went into Jewish education, she graduated from college with a journalism degree from Northwestern, and so she went into TV news. She met my dad in the local Chicago ABC station, and the only job that she could get was a secretary because she was a she. And there was a quota system, and at that point, what that meant was there was a slot for the woman, so the women had to kind of vie for that slot, so it didn't make for a great collegiality or sisterhood among women, which is definitely different now. But also people didn't really listen. People didn't expect her to do, even though she did very well in school and she's a terrific writer and all that. The expectation was get the coffee, get the dry cleaning, take the notes in the meeting. One thing she was listened to on was she told her boss to hire my dad, so that was good.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([25:55](#)):

But that's such an interesting dynamic that you highlight that if there's only one or limited sort of quota official or otherwise spots for women to ascend into a certain role or position, that's inherently going to create competition instead of support and connection and collegiality.

Dana Bash ([26:15](#)):

And that is, I mean, I cannot emphasize this enough. That is one of the most dramatic, drastic differences between my mom's generation and mine and also, and especially now the younger generation working in my business, which is there's so many of us that there is genuinely that sisterhood and we compete with one another as we would compete with the man, but we also are there to lift each other up. The connections that I have with the women I work with, and not even just at CNN, but even our so-called competition friends at other networks is lifesaving. It's terrific.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([27:00](#)):

Well, and I think there's a balance between competition and working to be your best self, that you can be collegial and welcoming people in and supportive, and -- use the word sisterhood all day, We love it -- but I think that that sense of you don't have to have zero sense of competition, that can be a good thing. For sure too. We've been speaking about Esther as the lens and the frame, and I shared with you that moment for her where Mordecai says, "it's just for this moment that you find yourself in a position of leadership," really is the guide for me in the conversations that I have with our guests on the podcast.

I'm curious if there's a moment like that for you where you feel like you've been in the right place at the right time to lead.

Dana Bash ([27:50](#)):

Well, first of all, they're countless times that I've been in the right place at the right time because so much of life, particularly professional life, is that you can have skills, you can have talents, you can have experience, but so much of it is timing and luck, and it is the magic and the moment happens when all of those things come together at the same time, which I think is what you're alluding to. That's what happened with Esther, because if Esther didn't have the fortitude to do what she did, if she didn't have the sort of moral compass, if she didn't have that sense of Jewish identity internally, even though she didn't tell anybody externally that she was Jewish, then she wouldn't have done what she did. Look, I think it's happened over and over again. I think anytime I have the honor, and I really do think it's an honor, of participating in a big event that will determine the outcome of an American election, like participating in a debate.

([28:53](#)):

Those are those moments where I'm there and I have life experience, I have professional experience, I have a tremendous team, and for me, it's about truth. It's about facts, it's about what's right, and those are my key principles. When I have the platform, when I have the time, when I have the ability to say something or do something, it is always through the prism of what is my job as a journalist, and that is to ask the tough questions, ask the right questions for the people who are relying on me and my colleagues to have that access and that proximity.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([29:36](#)):

The last piece that I wanted to ask you about is I love this Jewish concept that if you're breaking up a reading from the Torah, doing an aliyah, a couple section of verses, then you never want to end on, and then the ground opened up and swallowed everyone up, which does happen sometimes in the Torah, if we get into the biblical text. You want to end on, and then there was peace in the land, and it's called a nechemta, right? You want to end that particular reading, those collection of verses that you're chanting and saying publicly out loud on a hopeful note on an upswing, and I'm just thinking about the fact that you report and folks are experiencing the world events, whether it's in the Middle East, in the United States on some really challenging, heavy issues. We are in a heavy moment in the United States and around the world. I'm wondering if either there's a story or a word of hope that you'd like to end on as we think about that concept of a nechemta as our guide.

Dana Bash ([30:41](#)):

Yeah. I think there's a lot of hope in the world because we see this, let's just look west instead of to the Middle East. Look at Los Angeles and the fires in Los Angeles. I mean, that was and is a huge tragedy, and there was some bad stuff. There were, never mind what Mother Nature brought, but there were some arsonists. At the same time, you see so much humanity, so much good, so much community, neighborly sensibility coming out all over the place in a town that is known for being cutthroat and all about, not necessarily materialism, but the whole point of LA is, it's called Tinseltown, and that is the opposite of what we're seeing there. Watching that as devastating and destructive as those fires have been, seeing people come out for one another has been remarkable. I mean, that kind of thing really gives me hope.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([31:54](#)):

Just For This: Season 3, Episode 1

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 Shimelonis wrote our theme music. Thanks for listening. We'll have more just for this moments next time.