

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

SARA HURWITZ INTERVIEW  
*MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA*  
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**Sara Hurwitz**  
**Rabba**  
**4/27/2011**  
**Interviewed by Talleah Bridge McMahon**  
**Total Running Time: 49 minutes and 10 seconds**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Makers: Women Who Make America  
Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Sara Hurwitz  
Rabba

**Sara Hurwitz**

**Rabba**

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

So can you start by telling me your name and what it is that you do?

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SARA HURWITZ:

My name is Rabba Sara Hurwitz and I am on the rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale where I function as a rabbi. And I'm also Dean of Yeshivat Maharat, a yeshiva that confirms orthodox women as rabbinic figures. The word we use is spiritual and halakhic leaders, spiritual leaders who deal with issues of law and the human spirit.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

You're known as a first of sorts.

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SARA HURWITZ:

I would say that the designation of "first" was assigned to me. I'm a little bit embarrassed by the term because I think there are other women who have sought out to become rabbis in their own quiet, private way. And so, there's a woman in Israel and there's a woman in California who feel that their orthodox rabbis. It's just- It hasn't been public. So I think what's different about my role is I'm the first woman who's been publically ordained and also functions in a orthodox synagogue as a rabbi.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

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So I want to start out by talking a little bit about your childhood. You were not born in the States.

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SARA HURWITZ:

I was born in South Africa, and I lived there until I was twelve, just after my bat mitzvah.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

And tell me about your life there.

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SARA HURWITZ:

The Jewish community in Johannesburg is very insular. It's very close knit and very traditional. We were all part of orthodox synagogues. Friday night celebrations, Friday night services, Friday night meals were a part of my childhood. And another part of my childhood was my aunt. My Aunt Judy used to run the children's service at the synagogue and her home was just a home filled with love and laughter-

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-and Shabbat was a time for people, family and friends to gather and I love that feeling, and so it was really she who inspired me to continue becoming

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more religious and I think she nurtured my love for synagogue and for being in synagogue.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

You moved to the States when you were twelve to Florida. Can you talk to me about that transition?

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SARA HURWITZ:

We moved to Florida in 1989, which was when Mandela was still imprisoned. I mention it because it was a really formative moment for my family and for me in particular. When we left, my parents sent us a message that all people should have equal rights and they also sent us a message of tolerance. So at a very young age, I understood that I could be anything and all people should have equal rights.

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I remember when we left South Africa, it was a little traumatic and difficult to leave family behind and I really- My parents, it was really courageous for them to leave when they did. And I remember about a year later when Mandela was actually released from prison, my parents were sitting- we were all gathered in our bedroom and they were crying and they just felt that they wanted to be a part of that revolution.

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And there was a tremendous excitement, both in South Africa and in my family, and I think it was at first difficult for them to be away from that exciting event in South Africa. But again, it was something, once again, that message of freedom and equality that they sent to me that I didn't know it would manifest itself in becoming a female rabbi. But I never thought I couldn't do anything I wanted.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

Talk to me about your life in the United States.

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SARA HURWITZ:

I moved to Florida. I was almost thirteen. I don't remember much of my time there. I moved from a very small Jewish day school to a very large middle school, public middle school, for the last six months of 8th grade. And it was a tough transition. I have a sister who's almost three years older than me and we were always close but we became very good friends because we were really there for one another.

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And I also think religion gave me something to do in a way. I decided to become a little bit more traditional and take on more of the religious aspects of Judaism. And that also meant being part of a synagogue community and youth groups, and so I think I was seeking for a place to fit in. And coming

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from a very small close knit Jewish community to this very vast, big community in south Florida was a little bit jarring for me. And so I gravitated towards the synagogue and I gravitated towards Jewish communal life.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

As you were growing up and graduating high school, did you see yourself taking on a leadership role in the clergy in some way?

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SARA HURWITZ:

I was always involved in Jewish stuff somehow. In Jewish youth group- I remember in my public school there was no- there was very little Jewish programming. I was one of two orthodox Jews in the school. And there was one year, there was no Holocaust memorial programming and I was rather upset about that, and so I had suggested to the school to run a Holocaust memorial event.

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And I remember that being a moment of true leadership, because I introduced an idea and I ran the entire program and I think it was very successful, and I believe that the school now does Holocaust education, whereas before they didn't. So I think that was my first taste of impacting the community and it felt right.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

And when you were graduating you took a test, a sort of career aptitude test to see what you should be. Can you tell me about that?

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SARA HURWITZ:

So I don't ever think I dreamed or thought I would be a rabbi, but somebody thought I should be. Before I went to Barnard, my parents insisted that I take a vocational test just to see where my aptitude lay and what I was best suited to be, and the result of the test showed that I was best suited to be in clergy. And at the time, we laughed because there was no such thing as a female orthodox rabbi. And so, I put that information aside and pursued other things in college, but I did continue to be involved in Jewish community.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

How did you ultimately start to go down that path?

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SARA HURWITZ:

During college, I was involved with a small Jewish organization called Lights in Action. It's no longer in existence, but at its time, we provided Jewish education material for students, by students. We ran weekends gathering

students together, Jewish students together, around topics of spirituality or interfaith dialogue or interdenominational dialogue.

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And so it was a great experience for me of community building. And after I graduated, I went on to direct the organization for a few years, and that's when I really realized that I was destined to remain in the Jewish community or in formal education in some way. And so I decided to go and do some self-edification and I went to Drisha Institute, which is an institute for higher learning for women on the Westside, where I spent three years in the scholar circle studying Talmud and Jewish law.

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And in order to gain acceptance in the orthodox Jewish community, in order to be seen as an authority in any way, you need to have a certain amount of knowledge and a certain amount of rabbinic education. And so, I saw that as a way to pave the road to becoming involved in informal education. And it wasn't until that I was graduating Drisha, that I realized my skill set was best suited to be involved in synagogue life and in both building community and teaching in informal settings.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

And what did you think that would lead to exactly?

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SARA HURWITZ:

While I was at Drisha, there was a movement that was beginning for women to begin working at synagogues as what was called Congregational Interns. And so that was my first job out of Dresha. I met with Rabbi Weiss and- Actually I met with Rabbi Wiess and I told him I was looking for a full time job in a synagogue, which really didn't exist but I thought it was possible. I didn't think it needed to be called rabbi but I thought I could have a place and a space in a synagogue.

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I don't think I cared frankly what the title was. And I remember he took me very seriously and we brainstormed a whole bunch of rabbis and communities that would potentially hire me full time as part of their synagogue. And then one thing led to another, and I started working very part time for the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale with Rabbi Weiss as a Congregational Intern. And that was- that's when I got a taste of what it was like to be involved in synagogue life and building community on that level.

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Interview:

Now talk to me about Rabbi Avi Weiss, because he sounds really unique in the orthodox community.

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SARA HURWITZ:

I would say that Rabbi Weiss is somebody who has a tremendous amount of integrity. He believes in Jewish people. He loves all people but he believes that Jewish people are his family. And so he is advocating- he advocates for the Jewish people and for human rights on every level. And so that's what- I would say he was famous, most famous, initially for the Soviet Union Movement-

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-and he was really central in helping Soviet Jewry, and I think that he continued to be an activist and advocate for Jewish people. I don't think that it was until much later in his life that he realized there was an inequality between men and women, that there was a disparity in terms of female and male leadership. The first time I really got to learn with him was when I was invited to participate in an internship program called Torat Miriam.

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It was a few hours a week and we would engage in topics around Judaism and the greater world, and that's when I got to know him a little bit. And I remember in one of those conversations, we talked about women and Judaism and he said that within five years from now, there will be women rabbis. And I think that I kinda perked up at that moment, and I started believing it.

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It took a little longer than five years and I don't think he really knew it was going to happen, but I think his heart was always in the right place. I think he

was always moving towards carving out a space and a place for women to participate in rabbinic leadership.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

Can you talk to me a little bit more about that? Like why was he pushing for that? What had happened for him that led him to believe in that?

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SARA HURWITZ:

I think he looks out at the Jewish community and realizes that women are fifty percent of the population and women have tremendous potential and have tremendous abilities and passion and I think that passion wasn't being nurtured and was being lost. And I think he realized that there's generally a lack of Jewish spiritual leaders, good Jewish spiritual leaders, and we needed to open up the role to women to serve the community.

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I mean, a rabbi is essentially somebody who serves the Jewish community, and it's a privilege to do but it's a tough job and I don't think there's a lot of people who desire to do it. And so I think he realized that there are many women with great skill and natural abilities, and I think he started moving towards creating a space and a place for women to serve the community.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

What do you think he saw in you in particular? Why were you the one chosen?

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SARA HURWITZ:

I wish Rabbi Weiss was here to answer that question. I don't know what he saw in me. I think that... I don't think either Rabbi Weiss or myself knew what would- what the end result would be. I remember after working at the synagogue for a year, we were walking one afternoon and it was the High Holidays and we both, together at the same time, started dreaming about what it would be- what it would take to be a full member of the clergy.

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And we realized that I'd need to have a certain number of years of learning in order to be taken as- in order to be seen as an authority, I would have to have- I would have to cover a certain amount of rabbinic material. But I think he saw that I really just wanted to serve the community, and I wasn't interested in making a media splash. I wasn't interested in being a "first." I was already in a synagogue and I just wanted to continue finding ways and gaining avenues to serve the Jewish community.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

If that's true, then why did choose to use that title? How did you get to the place where you thought that title was specifically important?

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SARA HURWITZ:

What I do has never been about title, but what I came to realize is title helps me do my job much better. And so, one example is when you walk into a house of mourning, when you walk in as a guest to offer comfort, Judaism traditionally describes how a person should sit silently until the mourner approaches or talks to you so that you can gauge their mood before you talk to them.

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But when you are a rabbinic presence, you have an entirely different role. You walk into a room and you're there to comfort the person, perhaps you've officiated the service. You've been a little involved a little bit in the family dynamics and so your entire presence is different. And so I came to realize that when people began to see me as a rabbinic presence, it was much- When I had a title, I could be in that role and fulfill that position much better.

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We were initially fearful of having any "RB" sounding title. The title rabbi has- we knew would have political ramifications. So when I finished all my studies, we engaged in a few months' process to help- where members of our community came together to try to figure out what the most appropriate title

would be. And at the time, we decided to go with a made up title called Maharat.

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Maharat is an acronym and it essentially means- it describes the role of a rabbi. It stands for *manhiga hilkhaitit rukhanit Toranit*, which is a long way of saying a woman who is a spiritual and Torah or Jewish knowledge leader. And we were hoping that title would take off and people would come to associate female orthodox rabbi with the word Maharat. And it did work for a while, but what we realized was there was very little noise around the function I was playing.

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We expected there to be a tremendous outcry from the Jewish community and there was very little noise. And so a few months later, we decided to change the title from Maharat to Rabba which we thought would help people better understand who I am and what I do. And that's when the controversy broke out a little bit.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

And so what happened?

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SARA HURWITZ:

So when I received the title of Rabbi in January 2010, and to our surprise—it sounds a little bit funny to say that now but we were surprised—there was tremendous fallout, and the Jewish community, the orthodox community, just couldn't handle the “RB” sounding title. And I came to understand something very central, which is that the community was less concerned about the function of a woman as a rabbi but they needed to- it needed to be clear that it was within an orthodox context.

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And so I used to say that I function almost 100% as a rabbi, which I do, on a day-to-day basis, my role is entirely rabbinic in nature. If you wake up in the morning and you're overseeing a baby naming, and then sitting with a couple counseling them through a difficult time in their life, and then perhaps writing eulogy, and then preparing for a class and or a sermon for that Shabbat, what I do if not a rabbi?

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I came to understand that there are three red lines I call them, that women cannot do, and I realized it was important to help people understand that these three things are distinct in the orthodox community. So the three red lines are that a woman can not lead certain parts of the prayer service, a woman can not count in a *minyan* or a quorum during a prayer service, and a woman can not sit on what we call a *beit din* or oversee a conversion, for example, be a witness to formal lifecycle events.

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Now those three things don't necessarily impact the work of a rabbi on a day-to-day basis, which is why I've often kind of brushed them under the carpet. After the controversy broke out, I realized that it was important to help people understand that I am a rabbi within an orthodox context. And so the word rabba is meant to indicate those differences that I can function as a rabbi but there are those small differences.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

So you keep describing that there was an outcry and there was a controversy, can you tell me what happened?

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SARA HURWITZ:

The orthodox community is diverse like all communities. And within the orthodox community I would say there is a center and there's... to the right of the center and to the left of the center. And our community falls, I would say, to the left of the center. We call ourselves a modern open orthodox community. And I think that essentially means that we aspire to inclusiveness in all aspects of our community as much as possible.

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I think the community to the right is afraid of a secular community, is afraid of feminism, and believes that Halakhah, or Jewish law, should not be impacted by the outside community. And I think that the fear was- I think

that the orthodox community to the right feared that this was not within the framework of Jewish law.

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After the initial angst came about, I came to realize that there were very few arguments that were made around Jewish law. I of course had spent some time studying and analyzing Jewish law to make sure that what I do is completely within the context and within the framework of Jewish law. I would never want to do anything outside of Halakhah, as it's called, which is Jewish law. And I felt very confident that the role I was playing is within the confines and context of Jewish law.

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And so people, the Jewish community, started throwing around the word of, "This isn't traditional. It may be by the letter of the law but this is outside of what's done in our community." And the truth is that there was always a woman in every generation. There was always a woman who stood up and stood out as the leader. I'll just give you one example. There was a woman in Kurdistan whose father was head of the Yeshiva in the 16th century, the head of the learning center.

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And when he passed away, he made her promise that she would take over and be the head of this learning center, which meant that she was the one who is deciding Jewish law, which is a role of a rabbi. And so I would say that in every generation, there was precedent, there was a tradition of women being a rabbinic or a spiritual presence but it's not the norm. And I would say

that anything that's outside of the norm is uncomfortable for the orthodox community that's a little bit more to the right.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

And can you talk to me about the risks that were involved in this?

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SARA HURWITZ:

I think giving me the title rabba and the conferral ceremony was very courageous and I really credit Rabbi Weiss with taking that step and putting his name on the line 'cause what- the potential was he could've been thrown out of the orthodox community. Which I think for him, I don't think wouldn't have mattered as much because like me, we both are very confident in our belief in God and our belief in values, but it would've impacted our community.

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And as I said, you can't be a rabbi without a community, so we wanted to make sure our base was with us and it's important for our Hebrew Institute of Riverdale community to feel like they're part of the orthodox fabric, the larger fabric of the orthodox community. And so the fear was that the RCA, which is the Rabbinic Council of America, the main orthodox body of rabbis would through our synagogue and throw Rabbi Weiss out of the RCA, the Rabbinic Council of America.

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And that's when we entered into a dialogue with the RCA, to ensure that our synagogue and Rabbi Weiss were not actually thrown out. It's important for us to be part of the orthodox community ultimately, and we wanted to- so we were willing to compromise on title. We entered into a compromise position where Rabbi Weiss would not ordain future graduates of Yeshivat Maharat as rabba.

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I would keep my title as rabba and my ordination was never taken away from me, but moving forward, we don't know what the future holds. The likelihood is that our graduates will be known as Maharats, and what we are trying to do is help people understand that Maharat is really a synonym for rabbi within the orthodox context.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

When you made that agreement, did that feel like a loss or a win?

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SARA HURWITZ:

It was a win because it was the first time that the orthodox community was engaging with women's roles in such a serious way, and so I think we really pushed them to carve out a space and a place for women. I think they realized women have something to give and women need a space to be able to lead in

the Jewish community. And so, that was very exciting because they wrote up a doctrine of what women can do and in what context and they never engaged with the topic of women and rabbinic leadership before.

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There were definitely disappointing moments and days. Definitely days where I wanted to give up and just put the whole thing behind me, but I know that would've been very disappointing for the eleven year old girls who were sending me letters saying that now they had a role model to look up to and their orthodox Judaism was more "potential filled," quote, end quote, because they have somebody to aspire to be like, to have that role model that I never had when I was entering college.

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And so I realized I had to stick with it, and I didn't want to be the cause of a controversy but I didn't want to be the cause of the split in the Jewish community either, in the orthodox community specifically. But I think that in the end, there was greater good that came out of it than was detracted from the community.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

You're going against thousands of years of tradition. What gives you the nerve to do that?

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SARA HURWITZ:

My philosophy in life has always been to put one foot in front of the other and not think about the consequences so much. And I think what gives me the nerve to do what I do is the small differences I can make in people's lives. So the example, the woman who- A Holocaust survivor who suffered a tragic loss in her family, and as rabbis do, we drop whatever we're doing and run to be with our congregant.

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And I sat with her all throughout that day and helped her through a very difficult time of identifying her son and was there when she fell on my shoulder crying, helped her through the funeral, and we have a bond now and we continue to be there for one another. I think that's what gives me the audacity to do what I do because I realize that I have something to give and offer people, and it's a tremendous honor that people let me into their lives in that way.

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There was a couple who called me around the whole controversy who had heard my name, and they had a particular issue that was of concern and they hadn't found any rabbi that was able to help them. And we worked through their concern, it was one that had a Jewish law ramifications. And after talking to them a few times, they came back to me and they called me and said, "We've been struggling with this issue for eleven years and we were on the verge of getting a divorce, but now that you've helped us we're ready to move forward."

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And so that's what gives me the audacity to do what I do, not because I'm looking to make large changes in the world, but really to impact peoples' lives in small ways.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

I'm a little ignorant about the specifics of Orthodox Judaism. But my basic understanding is that it does actually go against orthodox beliefs for a woman to take this role. What do you say to that?

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SARA HURWITZ:

I have studied Jewish law specifically on this issue and there are, I think essentially, three potential issues that come up around the question, "Can a woman be a rabbi?" The first is, "Can she engage with text and then be an authority on that text?" In other words, can she give what's called Halakhic advice, or be a *posek*, or a *poseket* is the feminine version.

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So for example, if in the orthodox community, since we abide by Jewish law, if there is a question of meat and milk coming together in the kitchen, often somebody will turn to the rabbi to help them through that question. And then there's larger questions about fertility and modern medicine and end of life issues where people often need to turn to their rabbis for advice.

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And so the question is can a woman be in a position to give that advice? And a back and forth discussion on the law seems to indicate that if a woman is what's called a *chokhmah*, or an expert on Jewish law, then she can be in a position of *poseket*, or she can be in a position of giving this legal advice. There is precedent of women actually doing that. So that's issue number one. Issue number two is, can she be a leader in the community?

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The Hebrew word is *srarah*. Can she be a rabbinic leader? And again, there is a back and forth conversation, and I wouldn't say that there's universal acceptance but there is strong proof text to show that women can actually be in a position of leadership. One example is when the state of Israel came about, they had to deal with this question of women being in the government.

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Can a woman be a leader, and lead not only the Jewish community, but the Israeli community? And since the Israeli community wanted to incorporate Jewish law into secular law, they actually had to grapple with this notion of women as leaders, and the rabbis dealt with it and came out on the side that women can be in positions of leaders, and we know that Golda Meir was the Prime Minister. And so again, there has been a- there is precedent of women as leaders.

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I'd say another issue is an issue of modesty. Women have traditionally played a more private role. Their role has been attached to the home more than the

synagogue or the marketplace. But that's changing. And now that women are CEOs and lawyers and doctors, and can reach the highest places in secular society, I think there is no concern of modesty anymore because we're used to seeing women out and about in the streets.

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And so having a woman be in a spiritual leadership role should be no different than having a woman doctor or woman president one day. And so, I think that the issue of modesty is also not such a concern.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

Can you talk to me a little bit more about that, about the issue of modesty?

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SARA HURWITZ:

Look, women's main role in traditional Judaism has been to tend to the house and tend to children. Two things, by the way, that I take very seriously still today. And so for example, there wasn't a space even for women in the synagogue. As women started coming out of their homes, they had to accommodate the fact that women needed a prayer space.

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And so the *mechitza* developed. The divider between men and women, or the balcony, as you may see some orthodox synagogues have women upstairs. Up until about the sixteenth century, there wasn't a prayer that was appropriate

for women to say in the morning. So there's morning blessings, and one of the blessings is still said, I think, today which is, "Thank you God for not making me a woman."

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So women cannot actually say that blessing. Up until the sixteenth century, women did not come out into the public prayer space. Once they did, synagogues had to accommodate so they had to build a *mechitza*, or a divider to separate men and women, which is traditionally how men and women pray together. And there's a blessing, a morning blessing, that is said by men which is, "Thank you God for not making me a woman."

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And so there was a blessing that men say, "Thank you God for not making me a woman." Women could not say that blessing and so in the sixteenth century, when women started coming into the prayer space, they had to devise a new blessing for women to say which is, "Thank you God for making me according to your will." And so, there's always been a change to accommodate the reality of women coming out of the house and coming into a more public sphere.

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And also the word modesty is often associated with how a woman dresses, but I think actually that word should apply to men and women and really describe one's behavior. So I think you can stand in front of many people and conduct a sermon but give it in a modest fashion.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

Do you see that as sexist at all?

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SARA HURWITZ:

I accepted it to be a part of the orthodox community, and with that comes certain areas where women cannot enter. I thought that women could not enter the rabbinic and I was wrong, it turns out. Once I accepted to be part of the orthodox community, I realized that there were going to be limits for women and on women, and that doesn't mean I don't struggle with it everyday. I don't struggle- I struggle with the fact that I cannot be part of a *minyan* or a quorum.

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I can't tell you how many times I've been the tenth person in a room, when we're trying to begin a certain prayer, and we've had to wait for that tenth man, and somebody in the room inevitably will say, "Oh, don't you wish you could count?" And, "Hahahaha," and they'll think it's a joke. It's not funny. It's not funny because I take it very seriously. This is what I've chosen to do. But with that choice comes limitations and I think I've accepted that. It doesn't mean I don't struggle with it.

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I've learned to compartmentalize the do-not's and struggle with what I cannot do in an intellectual way. But on a day-to-day basis, I just keep putting my feet forward and keep focusing on what I can do.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

When you say that you accept the limitations, but why?

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SARA HURWITZ:

When I immigrated from South Africa to south Florida, I found tremendous comfort in the orthodox community. That's my community. That's the community I love. It's the community I feel most comfortable in and it's the best fit with my belief system. And so, it never occurred to me to step outside of my community. I think that I decided, and I think it's rather exciting, to push the envelope from within and try to make space from within my community rather than just giving up and just going to a different community where I don't think I would fit in.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

So I find that interesting because I also- There's a way in which it just seems like your community is saying you don't belong to them. So can you just talk to me about that, that sort of conflict?

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SARA HURWITZ:

I think I live in a bubble in a day-to-day world. On a day-to-day basis, I live in a little bit of a bubble because my community does accept me. I'm able to function in the way I do because I have a fabulous community who turns to me and looks to me for my teaching and makes space for my sermon and comes to me with their deep, dark problems and issues.

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I know that the larger community struggles with my role, but whenever I step out of my community, I'm always surprised. I know it sounds funny, but I was recently in a community where I learnt after I had spoken, that the orthodox community had tried to get me thrown out and tried to get the event canceled. And that's not the first time.

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I've been asked to speak in certain places and then been disinvited, which is painful. Very painful, and always surprising to me. I think maybe one day I'll get used to it and, and realize that not everybody in the community wants me. But then I realize this isn't for everybody. What I do is not going to benefit every aspect of the orthodox community. We are a diverse people. And so, the community more to the right is not looking to their women to impact them and looking to them as leaders in the community.

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And so, I'm not trying to make inroads into the more haredi or right wing community, but I do think there is a space and a place for women in the more modern orthodox community and that's the community I'm trying assert myself and make an impact and pave the road for my students to ultimately serve those communities.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

So why do you think it's important for women to take on leadership roles?

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SARA HURWITZ:

Women have a tremendous amount to offer the community. And I think that women have certain amount of compassion and I think that our approach may be different. I don't believe in putting any one person in a category, but I think that women have certain tendencies and so my community at the HIR, we have a male rabbi and a female rabbi.

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Rabbi Steven Exler is my co-rabbi and there's a wonderful- there's something wonderful about having a partnership and having men and women lead a community. Because sometimes you don't want to go to a man for a certain particular area, and sometimes you're looking for a woman's voice. And I think we do have a unique voice and we have something unique to offer.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

Why do you think there's been this long held tradition of keeping women out of leadership positions?

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SARA HURWITZ:

I think it's just tradition. It's just what's been done. It's been the part of... Our religion is patriarchal, our text is patriarchal. It's written by men. And so, I think it took a long time for women to find their voice within a text and to see themselves within the text and therefore within the religion. And I think once women started asserting themselves into the text and then, instead of being the objects of what was being discussed,-

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-and then finding a space and a place within the text, I think the next step was looking to give over that text to other people and to share their interpretation and our view and our lens through which to- our lens of looking through the text. I think that everybody, each individual, has a different way of seeing things. And I think that although the text is patriarchal, women have a way of interpreting that text and sharing it with others.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

Now, you sound so optimistic. I mean throughout this, everything that you- like you say it all in a cheery voice and you're really optimistic that you'll be able to make these changes, and I'm just wondering why that is.

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SARA HURWITZ:

I've been doing a lot of traveling recently and it's been a wonderful experience because what I find is when I'm invited to a community, people are surprised at who I am and how nonthreatening it actually is, and that gives me a lot of hope and it gives me a reason to be optimistic because each time I go to a community I see people open themselves up to the possibility of having a woman as a spiritual leader.

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And whereas before they may never have imagined learning from a woman or speaking to a woman for their spiritual needs, now they're open to it. So I've seen communities, who never would've thought to invite a woman to be a scholar in residence, turn to me and have seen members of the community be open to having me present there. And so I do have reason to be optimistic. I do think there will be a place for our women to serve in the community.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

I read a quote from a rabbi who basically accused you of being influenced by feminism. Is that a fair assessment?

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SARA HURWITZ:

If feminism means equality and openness and possibility for all people, then I'm proud of that and I don't see that as an insult at all. I think that if the feminist movement has pushed the larger community to create places and spaces for women to function and reach their potential, then feminism is wonderful.

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So I think that the Orthodox Rabbinic community is afraid of that word because I think that they are afraid that it would undermine rabbis and that women are looking to undermine rabbinic authority. I think that the more the community will see that our women are looking to teach and looking to serve the community but not looking to change or undermine Jewish law or to change the structure of Jewish law or to throw the tradition down the toilet,-

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-then I think that people will realize that having women in the position is a tremendous plus for the community.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

Do you identify yourself as a feminist?

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SARA HURWITZ:

If feminism means being open and tolerate, then yes, it's a term I embrace. And I stand on the shoulders of women who've made tremendous inroads both in the world at large and in the Jewish community. And there's certain things that I get to take for granted. For example, women before me didn't have access to Jewish text. I was a beneficiary of institutions that have taught many women.

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But it wasn't until really the turn of the century that women were given access to Jewish text and Jewish learning. And now I can just take that for granted. And I think that women in the greater community, and feminism in general, have pushed us all to find- to allow women to achieve the greatest heights.

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And so, there is no profession that women cannot do. And I think that women in spiritual leadership is just one more position that there is just no reason why women cannot fill it.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

Why is "feminism" a dirty word?

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SARA HURWITZ:

I think we live in a post-feminist world and it's that sense of entitlement that allows people to shy away from the word "feminism," because they get to be doctors and lawyers and they don't have to battle and fight the fight that their parents may have. And so, I think that this is my generation's rebellion, really.

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Their parents had to fight for something, and so the pendulum has swung back to rebelling against what their parents stood for. But if you really take a step back and look at the community, they may not call themselves feminists, but we are all living feminist values. We're all- Just by the fact that women are learning Torah, are able to benefit from Jewish text, just by the fact that women can have central roles in synagogue life,

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-by the fact that women can function in the secular world in the way that they do, it's really thanks to those that came before us who did fight the fight for us.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

Talk to me about your family, specifically how your husband sees what it is that you do.

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SARA HURWITZ:

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We're coming on our ten year anniversary, with my husband, and I always joke around that I'm not sure he knew what he was signing up for when we got married. But I wouldn't be able to do what I do without his support. He's really my rock and a real partner in life and is my greatest supporter and fan. He's a lawyer and also works very hard and so we have to juggle. We have three young kids.

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Yonah, Zacharya and Davidi. Our twin boys are 6 and Deviti is 2½. And they take a lot of energy and effort and it's really... Josh, my husband, and I are in partnership raising them.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

How do you think Josh compares to the other men of his generation in taking on that role of being so supportive for you?

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SARA HURWITZ:

I think we're moving towards homes where men and women participate much more equally, and so where it used to be that women had to find roles and men had to find roles, I think that's transitioning and much more fluid. And so the joke is, "Who makes lunch for the kids?" And so, traditionally women make lunch for the kids, and I would guess that's true in most homes, but I do think that's changing.

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And when men can feel comfortable in the kitchen and parenting by themselves, it allows women to function outside the home much more.

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TALLEAH BRIDGE MCMAHON:

You have three boys. How do you raise them to grow up being so open-minded and sort of respectful of the idea of women being in power?

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SARA HURWITZ:

It's just part of their fabric. Traditionally people refer to God as "he" in the Orthodox community, and my children refer to God as "she" sometimes, "he" sometimes, and I'm not even sure there was a lesson I taught them. I think that's just something that they have accepted as obvious in our household. I don't think they see anything wrong with a woman being a rabbi.

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I feel bad that they're going to have to battle in school sometimes. At the beginning of this year, my twin boys are in kindergarten, and Zacharya had an argument with one of his classmates about whether women can be rabbis. And so this little girl said, "Well, women can not be rabbis." He said, "Oh yes, they can." And she said, "No, no, they can not." And he said, "Oh yes, they can." And she said, "No, they can't." And he said, "Well, my mother is a rabbi."

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And so I think they understand there's something a little unique and different, but I think at the same time, they know that mom's a rabbi and dad's a lawyer and that's how it is. That's their norm. We're living in history right now, and I don't know what the future holds. I think that five years ago, I would not have imagined that I would be sitting here and have the honor and privilege to function in the way that I do. And I think that we've created a board of supporters through Yeshivat Maharat to help us through the next stage and phase of women's leadership.

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And so our women are going to graduate as Maharat but I hope that I will not be the only rabbi. I think that there's no reason why an institution cannot hire one of our graduates and give them the title of rabba. And I think that the sky's the limit. The sky's the limit for our graduates in terms of pulpit work, in terms of making an impact on university campus and organizational world. And so I think they can function as a rabbi. The limitations on women, I don't think impact the day-to-day work of a rabbi.

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