Diversity Dialogues: The Hon. Rachel Freier, April 2022

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, news and insight from the New York Courts. I'm John Caher.

Today's Diversity Dialogue segment features a guest unlike any we've ever had in the program before. New York City judge Rachel "Ruchie" Freier is believed to be the first Hasidic woman to hold public office in United States history. Dubbed the “Hasidic Superwoman of Night Court” by *The New York Times* and named one of the 50 most influential Jews *in the world* by the *Jerusalem Post*, Judge Freier shatters stereotypes about Hasidic woman neither being seen nor heard outside their insular community.

Judge Freier came to the practice a law relatively late in life. As is not unusual in her community, she married at 19 and had six children at a young age. It wasn't until she was 30 that she enrolled in Touro College. With a large family to care for, it took Judge Freier six years to earn a bachelor's degree in political science. She learned politics by interning with then U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton and other elected officials.

Judge Freier then went to Brooklyn Law School and obtained her law degree in 2005. After passing the bar, Judge Freier practiced commercial and residential real estate in Brooklyn and became an advisor and advocate for the citizens of Kiryas Joel, an Hasidic village in Orange County.

In 2016, she ran for New York City Civil Court, but has also served in the New York City Criminal Court. Judge Freier is also a licensed emergency medical technician and trained as a paramedic.

Judge, thank you for a coming on the program. Let's start with your roots, if we could. Where did you grow up? What did your parents do? Where did your grandparents come from?

Judge Freier: I grew up in the Borough Park section of Brooklyn. My parents are the children of Holocaust survivors. Actually, my father was born in the middle of the Holocaust. He doesn't even remember his father, who perished in the Holocaust. I do remember my father's mother, so she was a survivor. She survived in Antwerp in Belgium, and my mother's parents survived the Holocaust in Hungary.

: My grandmother survived the concentration camp, and my mother was born in a small village in Hungary. She actually remained in Hungary until the Communist revolution. That's when my maternal grandparents moved from Hungary to the United States. So I grew up surrounded by Holocaust survivors.

The Holocaust experience really was so much part of my growing up. My parents, my grandparents were very proud to be American. I was raised with a very patriotic childhood, being told all the time to be so appreciative and be happy that we live in the United States, that we could be proud of who we are and practice our religion openly without having to be afraid of being persecuted.

I grew up with a very well-rounded Jewish education, as well as a very, very strong appreciation for the United States and pride in this country and what it offers to us as religious Jews.

John Caher: Your family, between the Nazis and Communists, have endured a great deal of oppression.

Judge Freier: Correct.

John Caher: Who were your early role models growing up?

Judge Freier: My early role models in what sense, because there's so much that I've learned in my years growing up? My mother has been always my strength and my right hand in growing up and raising us and teaching us. My father also.

But in terms of my pursuit and my legal profession, it was my uncle, who, of blessed memory, was a state Supreme Court judge. When he married my mother's sister, I was a young girl and I loved law. As I was growing up, I watched my uncle run first for Civil Court judge after he clerked for a judge. Then I watched him become the state Supreme Court judge.

While I was doing my undergrad, he was my mentor all the years. While I was in my undergrad, I would spend time in his courtroom, on the bench next to him, and I would just watch him and learn from him. He was my role model in terms of the law and what can be achieved as a legal professional.

Then there were teachers of mine who taught me Judaism and all that encompasses and about being faithful and committed to our religion and how much we can accomplish when we have our faith. When we have

our faith, we know that there's a God that runs the world and he's an all-powerful God. We really have no limitations. There's so much that we can accomplish.

I really grew up in a very, very healthy environment. I had the parents who are role models for me. I had teachers who are role models to me. I learned that history repeats itself, and there's so much that we could learn from history.

But I also learned of the incredible potential that each human being has. Everybody's created the image of God with incredible potential, and we should always strive and achieve and never let failure stop us. So, it's a real, full, loaded question, because most people who ask me a one-dimensional question, like: "Who was your role model in pursuing a legal career?" But when you put everything together, it's like a diamond. There are so many facets. There've been so many people that have really impressed me that I don't even know if I could say that there's one person.

In Jewish history though, and in more modern history, there was a woman in history who was really been my role model. She was the founder of the movement for schools for Jewish girls, because there were never school for Jewish girls until around the 1920s, 1930s. She lived in Krakow, Poland, and now she's considered a revolutionary. Sarah Schenirer, she's the mother of the movement of schools for Jewish girls.

There's like so much about history that impresses me. I don't even know if I could just answer your question with just with one person. It's just been so many people and from all different walks of life.

John Caher: So, in a nutshell, you were influenced by a number of people— family, people outside the family, historical figures—just a whole lot of people who filled in various portions of your life and your being, is that correct?

Judge Freier: That is correct.

John Caher: What are the core Hasidic or "ultra-conservative" values? What distinguishes your group from other Jewish groups?

Judge Freier: Basically, Judaism is the religion based on the Torah, which we believe was written by God and given to the Jews by Moses on Mount Sinai. The ultra-Orthodox/ Chassidic community believes that the Torah was given then, and it's the same, it's one and the same. It never changes. We don't

believe in “reforming” the commandments. The way they were given is the way they're observed.

: The concept of Hasidism, which began in the 18th century, was really a response to antisemitism, a cohesiveness. We stick together as a group. It is a concept of serving God with joy, as opposed to being strict and formal. It's more joy, bringing joy and to the practice of Judaism. There’s a lot of singing, dancing and celebration.

It's also very much anti-conformist. We don't conform too much to modernity when it impacts our religion. The way that we observe the rules of what's kosher remains the same. The way we observe the Sabbath remains the same. When cars were invented, we didn't look for loopholes to be able to use the car. We don't use the car on Sabbath. The same thing in terms of our dress. We're very traditional.

: On the other hand, we're different than other religions, say, like the Amish, who people sometimes compare us to. There are distinctions between the Hasidim and the Amish. The Amish, they don't use electricity, but we do use electricity. However, on the Sabbath, we're not going to turn on the lights.

I don't want to get stuck in the minutia of it, but the overall embracing concept is that there is a very strong feeling of cohesiveness. We're all together. There's also the concept of we're not looking to reform what we do. We're not looking to change it. It's okay for us that we look different.

: When I was in law school, I knew that I looked different, but I was okay. I didn't feel compelled that I have to blend in with everybody else. It's okay for me to have my different perspective. It's okay for me to have my different style of dress. But at the same time, it doesn't stop me from being friends with other people from different walks of life and sharing my culture and sharing my religion.

The concept I think is that in many senses, we're almost frozen in time. But on the other hand, when it comes to treating the elderly or the sick, we want the most up-to-date medicine to treat the people who are sick. But when it comes to observance of the commandments, we're going to do it the traditional way. We're not looking to change things.

When you live it, it's just so much a part of what you do. You don't even think twice about it. But when you have to explain to an outsider, it

becomes a little complicated. That's why you have to really see it, see it in practice to really understand it.

John Caher: I think I understand. Now, what's the traditional role of a woman in that culture?

Judge Freier: The woman's role is very, very important, because in Judaism, Judaism is a religion based on your identity, which is based on your maternal background. Who is your mother? That's where it starts and that's where it ends. If your mother is Jewish, then you are identified as a Jew, and that has never changed.

Essentially, women are given the responsibility of carrying on their religion. That's, I think, the highest pedestal that women are put on. Like I said, I always tell somebody, it makes no difference who your father is, your father can be the greatest Jew in the world. But if your mother isn't, according to Judaism, you're not considered Jewish. The woman's role is a very important role, obviously, since she's carrying on the religion. Her role is to have a family and to be the anchor of the family. That's why getting married and having children is so important to us.

At the same time, if your role is having children and being the anchor of the family, there's going to be a lot of rules that you are going to be exempt from. Now, people from the outside, look at these exemptions to rules, oh, women aren't treated fairly, because you can't be part of a quorum minyan to pray.

I explain that the reason why we don't have to be part of the quorum of 10 is because when a woman prays, she can pray alone, because her prayer alone is okay, it's acceptable. She doesn't need to have nine other people in the room to keep her from getting distracted. That's how the role of the women sometimes could be misconstrued.

But the role of women is very important. I'm proud of my role in the kitchen and my role at home. If you were raising a large family, you have a lot of responsibility. So unlike other communities, where women sometimes feel pressure to go on to higher education, you don't really have that in the Hasidic community. That's not to say that there are ~~many~~ [NOT ANY] women who are going to college these days and who are pursuing careers and are achieving lots of success. If she decides to stay home and be a homemaker, she doesn't feel like she's missing something or not doing something that she should be doing.

John Caher: I think I understand. Now, there's certainly a perception that in your community, women are subservient to men. Is that fair or accurate?

Judge Freier: It's not fair and it's not accurate. However, that's not to say that there aren't men who have personality disorders and who do use religion to maybe oppress women. I have been fighting that myself with the organization that I formed and I direct, which is the first all-women's volunteer EMS organization. It was a clear example to me of where men were using religion to create a boy's club. They just didn't want to allow women to serve in the capacity as EMTs to help other women, and that's when I took a stand and I said, "This is not our religion. Don't take our religion and use it to disenfranchise women." It's not the religion that does it. It could be people who do it, but not the religion.

So, sometimes there are people who try to take Judaism and just manipulate things for their own advantage, but that's not the majority and that's not how we live our life. But most people in my community don't really spend too much time trying to explain to the outside world what really happens in the privacy of our homes. Either we're too busy or people think, oh, nobody really cares. Or people will say, "Well, what difference will we make anyhow?"

For various reasons, most of the outsiders don't really have a full understanding of our culture. That really always bothers me so much, which is really why I welcome opportunities to speak and share. So, a long-winded answer, but I hope I answered at least part of your question.

John Caher: No, that was very helpful. I believe you told Megyn Kelly in an interview that if you are, as it seems to be the case, the first Hasidic woman elected to public office, that your husband deserves credit for "allowing" his wife to pursue public office. Did you need his permission to do this?

Judge Freier: Not necessarily. In any relationship when people live together, you really want to have a consent between people who are together in what you do. So, it's not so much that I needed to have his "permission," but I didn't want to do it if he wasn't going to be supportive. The fact that he was so supportive, that not only did he consent to it and say, "It's okay," but he supported me completely, completely, with 110% of himself, was heartwarming, really special. He really, really understood that it was something that I wanted so badly and he was there for me every step of the way.

John Caher: I understand. Well, what was the immediate reaction of your husband, your parents, your in-laws, your religious leaders, your community when they learned of your interest in becoming a lawyer?

Judge Freier: I had been a legal secretary and paralegal for many years. I graduated high school when I was 17, and at that time there were no college opportunities for the Hasidic ultra-Orthodox community. For me, it was just going to high school; getting my high school diploma was the furthest I was going to go. I had no aspirations of going to college because it wouldn't have been acceptable.

As a legal secretary, I became quite well known in the community, because I was working for local lawyers. People just assumed that I was somehow a legal expert, so then when I finally did go to law school, it was, "Oh, finally, you're going to become a lawyer." People thought I was a lawyer before I even actually became a lawyer.

I did it in a very, very slow fashion over many, many years. I graduated high school, became a legal secretary at the age of 17, worked for law firms, first locals and then in the city for these large law firms.

By the time I started my undergrad and enrolled in college, I was 30. I already had my first three children. So I did it very slowly. It took me six years. I was still working full-time while I was going to college part-time, and I had my fourth child, and then my twins were born during my years in college. So everything happened very slowly, all open to the community.

I think by the community, seeing who I am and seeing the family I was raising, were very accepting of it. Nothing that I did was considered unacceptable. So, everything I did really was embraced. In fact, even when I ran [FOR] ~~to~~ public office—and remember, I ran, I had to have the votes of my community. I didn't just get appointed.

John Caher: Of course, of course. Now, you mentioned that earlier on, it would not have been “acceptable” for you to go to college. Not acceptable by who?

Judge Freier: The community itself. When we went to school girls went to all-girls schools and the boys went to the boys school, the yeshiva. That's how it always has been. College was considered a very secular environment. When Touro College opened up and other colleges that were geared to the observant Jewish community with separate classes for men and women, and no classes over the Sabbath or the Jewish holidays, with teachers who were Jewish, most of them at least, it became acceptable,

because Hasidim don't change, but when opportunities change, they were there. When they catered to our needs, then it was okay to go, and we were able to go to college.

John Caher: When you were at Touro, you not in an integrated environment?

Judge Freier: No, they have a women's division and a men's division.

John Caher: How were you treated by other students and professors?

Judge Freier: In Touro?

John Caher: Yes.

Judge Freier: Oh, very well. I was always an older student because I was like 30 when I started. I was an older student, but I loved it. To me, it was like a dream come true. Finally, finally, I'm able to see myself on a path of higher education. I had no idea how long it would take me. I had no if I would be successful, but I knew that I had to try, and that's what I did.

John Caher: If I understand correctly, it would not have been acceptable for you to go to a traditional co-ed college, where you were with boys and girls of all different communities.

Judge Freier: That's correct. That is correct.

John Caher: Now, you majored in political science. Why?

Judge Freier: Initially, when I decided to go to college, I figured, let me major in business, because even though law school was my dream, I don't know if I'll get there. I started to take classes in economics and I sat there and I listened to the professor talking about guns and butter and all these different economic theories, and I said, "This is not for me." I quickly changed to political science and pre-law, and I was like Alice in Wonderland. I just loved it.

John Caher: So, it wasn't politics specifically you were thinking of going into. You had in your mind at that point a bedrock of information that you may use to go to law school.

Judge Freier: Yeah. I knew that I wanted pre-law because I have a passion for law. It was just part of my genetic DNA. I love advocacy. I love justice and law. I think it was also just fascinating to see the interplay and how Judaism,

being one of the oldest religions, had impacted so much in general on laws for society. I found that very interesting.

John Caher: Well, isn't Judaism basically the root of contract law?

Judge Freier: I believe it is. I believe it is.

John Caher: Now, how in the world did you get through law school? At some point you were in law school, you had six kids, two of them infants. How do you juggle studying for the bar and fulfilling all your duties as a mother and a homemaker? You've got several full-time jobs there at once. How did you do that?

Judge Freier: I tried to take it very slowly. Whatever I could do part time, I did part time. I also prayed a lot. I asked God, "Please help me, because I couldn't do this without really divine providence and divine assistance."

My mother always says, "Time is like money. It's not how much you have; it's how you spend it." I didn't talk on the phone too much. I didn't go to parties. I didn't go to dinners. I really had to limit the places that I would be going and the things that I would be doing. I knew also that this was a long-term goal. I knew that I wasn't going to rush anywhere.

I think that's how I did it, just doing it fully every day, step by step, and also I just loved it. I was just so grateful that I was here, that I was doing it. I was just so happy to be doing it so even if it was hard, it's what I wanted to do.

John Caher: What is it that attracted you to the law?

Judge Freier: I think it's just genetic. Since I was a little kid, I'm the oldest of my siblings, and whenever somebody needed to have someone argue for them or defend them, my parents always sent me. I was the one that would always take a stand and stick up for people who I felt were being treated unfairly.

I was always a little kid that was a lawyer. When my mother would need someone to call up a customer whose checked bounced, she would ask me to do it. So, I think it was just that. I think that's just part of who I am, always looking at what's wrong, what's the injustice I could correct. That makes me feel like I did something good, I helped somebody else.

John Caher: I know you did a lot of work, at least at one point, for Kiryas Joel, which has a reputation of being a very close-knit community. But you, as an

attorney, arranged interviews with women in the community, something that I don't think had been done very often, if ever, to challenge the stereotypes. You've appeared often in the New York City and national media. You are, it seems, unusually outspoken. Why have you taken on that role?

Judge Freier: Because I saw that the Hasidic community had very negative PR in the media, and I felt that it was almost our own doing. I felt that if we were going to shun the media and we were going to say, "They don't understand us, and we're not going to speak to them," then can we ever expect them to give an accurate portrayal of who we are?

I was speaking to a couple of rabbis, and I said, "I think it's so important. I think it's critical." When I started to speak publicly, the internet was just starting. It was just at the turn of social media. I said, "This is the age of information. It's very nice to say that we want to be insular, but we have to change the way we are insular. We have to maintain our insularity, but we have to allow the outside, at least the ones who are genuinely interested, to hear it from the perspective of an insider. We can't expect outsiders to accurately portray our lifestyle and our emotions and our dedication."

: Then, there also are people who have left the community, for whatever their reasons may be, who go out in the media and they share their negative experience, which may be true for them, but that doesn't describe anybody else. I felt it was important for people who are within the community, who are proud of who we are to have a voice, but it just, I felt it didn't exist. I felt that there was no platform for this type of voice.

I said, "I'm going to create it." It was my last year in law school, when, just by happenstance, while I was at a zoning board meeting just to observe and learn, because I was taking a class in zoning in law school, I was approached by somebody from the Village of Kiryas Joel who asked me to assist him in creating the zoning ordinance for Kiryas Joel.

That's what actually propelled me to work for the village and then open up my law practice there. I started to represent clients when I was still a law student under my work professor's guidance and supervision. It was then when I saw how critical it was, because Kiryas Joel was even more insular than the part of Brooklyn that I live in.

I would see what the local newspaper was publishing. I said, "My goodness, if they would only know the truth, it would change what they're saying." I sent an email and the reporter and I became real good

friends since then. His name is Chris McKenna. I said to him, I said, "Let me introduce myself. I'm Hasidic. I'm in my last year of law school, and I have many friends and close family in Kiryas Joel. I think if you would get to know us better, it may change your perspective and the way you write."

: He responded right away. He said, "I have my contacts in KJ, but they're all men. So, if you want to meet with me..." and that's how the relationship and the friendship started. I invited him to come with his wife and his child to our summer home for a Shabbos meal.

John Caher: I'm familiar with Chris. He's with the *Times Herald-Record*, isn't he?

Judge Freier: That's correct.

John Caher: I can relate to that experience. I was a newspaper reporter for many years. I wrote about the Kiryas Joel litigation that went to the Supreme Court at the time it was going on. I went to Kiryas Joel. I would've been happy to talk to people, but I couldn't find anyone that would talk to me. They would just ignore me or walk away or tell me I couldn't possibly understand or pretend they didn't speak English. I knew I was only getting half the story, but the other wasn't available.

Judge Freier: That's it. That's what I thought was so important.

John Caher: So, I think what you're saying is you can be 100% true to your values and still have a public voice.

Judge Freier: That's what I said. I needed to at least try. I had a great aunt. She's not alive anymore, but my grandmother's sister was one of the early, early families, one of the pioneers that had moved from Brookyn to Kiryas Joel when the village just opened up.

I asked her if she would allow me to come with a reporter on a Friday, so he can come and see the household preparation for Shabbos and to see her and the children, the grandchildren. She went to ask the rabbi for permission. She wanted to know is it allowed, and he answered her, he said, "Not only can you do it, but you should do it, take this opportunity."

That's was just the beginning of my learning so much. Chris McKenna also learned so much, and I met with other reporters as well. I do think that with social media and with time and with my having done it as well, more people are opening up and are speaking, which is so important, because

people really need to see the inside. But then not everybody should be doing it, so it's not for everybody.

John Caher: Sure, sure. I'd like to talk about your judicial position. I think you mentioned earlier, one of your many role models was an uncle, and I think you were referring to Judge David Schmidt.

Judge Freier: That's correct.

John Caher: So it wasn't unprecedented for the Democratic Party to nominate an ultra-Orthodox man. Was it a different challenge for an ultra-Orthodox woman?

Judge Freier: It was, and it wasn't, and I'll explain it. The fact that I was a woman and I wanted to become a judge was really not a problem. The first thing I did was I sat with the rabbi and I said to him, "Rabbi, before I really embark on this, I need to ask you, is there anything in Jewish law that I would be violating by running for this position?" He said, “No.”

So, that was clear. There was nothing in terms of any of the mitzva or the commandments that I would be violating by doing it, so that was clear. But then we come to the cultural part of it. Has it ever been done before, and can it be done? There wasn't a problem because over time Hasidic women have open businesses, become professionals. That wasn't a problem.

The problem that I encountered was that I had upset some of the leaders in the community because I was challenging the rules that EMS is only for men, not for Hasidic women. I had rabbinical support, and I was not going to take this lying down. That's where I had challenges, but not because I wanted to become a judge.

It's really interesting because people would think that, “Oh, the Hasidic community, they oppress women and they're way behind the times.” My story proves it's not true, because my own community went out and voted for me, and they were so proud. You have no idea of how proud they are, and still are. They come up to me and say, “How are you, Judge Freier?” I'll say, "I'm only ’Judge Freier’ from nine to five. After that, I'm just Ruchie Freier.’"

: I'm so grateful for my community, that they supported me, and people need to understand that I wasn't appointed by the mayor or the governor or anybody else. I had to run. I was on the street. I was collecting

signatures. People had to come out and vote for me, and that's how I won.

John Caher: Now, you couldn't have been elected solely with the votes of the people in your community. You had to have garnered a considerable number of votes from people who are not members of your community. Is that correct?

Judge Freier: Correct.

John Caher: Now, were there any constraints on you as Hasidic woman running for office that would not have been imposed on, well, your uncle, when he was running for office? Are there things he could do that you couldn't do?

Judge Freier: Well, there are restrictions on women who are ultra-Orthodox and observant to the degree that I am, and that is the gender divide between men and women. A lot of what we do in our community, in our observance, are, I wouldn't necessarily call them rules, but they've become rules, but they're based on being safeguarded.

Over the course of Jewish history, the rabbis have implemented safeguards, which we actually embraced as rules to keep ourselves on the right track and to make sure that as society goes on and advances, we remain committed to the authenticity of our religion. One of the rules that I follow, which applies to Hasidic men and Hasidic women is the separation of the genders in a physical sense.

I won't shake hands with a man. It makes no difference if he's a religious man or a non-religious man, I won't shake hands with the men. At the same time, if I have to go to a doctor for medical treatment, then that restriction doesn't apply. But the fact that I will not shake hands with the men and I have to campaign for their vote, that makes it a little bit challenging.

What I found over time is that no matter what community you come from or what standards you have or what values you have, if you're open and honest with people, Americans are amazing. They will respect you and look up to you for sticking to your values. So, at the end of the day, what may have seemed like a restriction or a limitation, ended up opening up more doors of opportunity, despite the fact that some windows were shot.

John Caher: I understand. I understand. That's interesting. Now, I know you ran for and were elected to a civil court judgeship, but I also know you've been assigned to criminal court. What made you gravitate to criminal law?

Judge Freier: I was assigned for the first two years to criminal court. Then I transferred back to civil. This really, it wasn't any choice of mine. We don't make these decisions. The OCA tells us where we're going to be working and every December, we get some surprises.

For the first two years, I was in Brooklyn criminal court. I found out two weeks before the term started, and I was shocked. I said, "You're making a mistake. I live in the Hasidic community. I never watch TV or movies. I don't have too much of a concept of criminal law other than what I learned in law school." They said, "Don't worry, we'll train you." Judge school was three days.

In any event, I learned so much from those years. It was so incredible. It was a very powerful and meaningful experience. I actually found that my years doing my pro bono work was very helpful when I worked in criminal court. My years helping kids at risk in the Hasidic community is what really made me connect with these young defendants.

: I realized it was the same trauma. The Hasidic boys that were doing drugs, they weren't bad boys. They were making bad choices because they had gone through trauma. I was really able to make that connection. Criminal court was very meaningful. I felt like I was really making a difference in people's lives, really understanding them.

I would speak to the defendants the same way I spoke to the boys that I would counsel. I would say: “You roll up your sleeves, work hard. You can't change your past, but you can change your future. Always believe in what you can accomplish. You can't control who your parents are, but you can control what you do with your life.

I had these defendants cry in the courtroom, and say, "Your Honor, no one ever told me things like this before." I think that my religious values and the values of the court system , with so many programs and services, is really what made my years at criminal court so meaningful. It was supposed to be one year. They asked me after the first year, "Would you stay for a second year?" I said, “Absolutely.”

Then I was transferred to Kings Civil Court. I was six months in Brooklyn Civil Court, where I am now, in 2019, for the first half a year. Then I went

to Queens for two and a half years, Queens Civil Court, also an amazing experience.

I don't know whose idea it is to move judges around, because we always resent it when we're told to pack up and go. But in hindsight, I could say I've learned so much in every courthouse that I've been to. I've learned from other judges, from other supervisors. I think it's really given me so much dimension that I couldn't have had just staying at one place the entire time.

John Caher: Are there ever times as a judge, when the law leads you in one direction and your faith leads you in another?

Judge Freier: That's a very interesting question, because I've been asked that same exact question many, many times, and the answer is no, and I'll explain to you why. On the one hand, you know about recusal. If there ever is a situation where I feel that I can't make a decision without some conflict, then I would have to recuse myself. That's one thing.

The other thing is, there is a concept in the Talmud that teaches us that the law of the land is the law that applies. So, the laws of the Talmud aren't applicable when I'm sitting in Civil Court in Kings County or Queens County. I'm not basing my decision on the Judaic rule of law. So, there's no conflict.

Judaism is based on truth, justice, fairness, not taking advantage of the poor, not taking advantage of the widows, the widowers, the orphans. So much of Judaism is based on compassion and justice that I don't see any conflict at all.

John Caher: Doesn’t the Constitution have similar values?

Judge Freier: It does. It does. I always say to all my fellow observant Jews that I have the best seat in the house, you know why? Because regardless of which court I'm signed to, above me are the words, "In God We Trust."

John Caher: Thank you, Judge.

Now, for the benefit of our listeners, let me mention that Judge Freier is a world class multitasker, and we paused and are continuing this conversation while she is driving — with a hands-free device, I am sure. So, if you hear any road noise, well, welcome to the frantic life of Judge Rachel Freier.

Judge, let me pick up where we left off. I believe you mentioned before that your community is joyous with lots of celebration and singing. That of course flies in the face of the perception of the Hasidic women living a dour, gray, joyless, sheltered life of subservience and sacrifice. Tell me the inside scoop, are you guys a life of the party?

Judge Freier: I think we are. I think that we are the life of the party. When you have an insular community, it makes it harder for an outsider to get an accurate perception of what the life of a Hasidic woman is all about.

What compounds it is that there's often periodicals or articles or media coverage from people who have left the community who have a very different story to share. But if you speak with people who are from within the community, who are living in the community, you'll get a very different perception.

I think that we are the life of the party, but that's not to say that things don't get hard at times, because just like any other family, any other mother of a family, life has its ups and downs. But I think that when you have holidays and family occasions to celebrate, it just gives you the opportunity to be happy and share joy.

So, tomorrow is Passover. I'll tell you that a lot of the work does fall on the women, but the men work very hard as well. But holidays bring celebrations, bring joy. It brings work at the same time, but the work comes with its benefits and its rewards as well.

John Caher: I understand. Now, you indicated previously that you didn't really get any pushback when you decided you wanted to go to college or law school or to become a judge, but you did run into some resistance in establishing an all-female ambulance corp. So first, could you tell me a little bit about the ambulance Corps and what is the name of it again, and then the resistance that you encountered?

Judge Freier: The name of the ambulance corps is a Hebrew word, Ezras Nashim, and it has a double translation. Ezras Nashim can have the translation of helping women, “nashim” being women, and “ezras” meaning helping, but the word ezras has a double meaning. The other meaning is the quarters, the section, and every synagogue has the women's section, which is called the Ezras Nashim. So, it is an all-women's volunteer corps and it's our place, our space, women for women.

John Caher: Why did you start it?

Judge Freier: I actually didn't start it. I was approached by a group of women about 12 years ago. They had gotten wind that I'm a bit of a community advocate, and they were looking for an attorney that would help them and represent them *pro bono*. They had been trained as EMTs about three decades ago when the all-male organization, which is fantastic and is known as Hatzolah, was formed, and there was initially supposed to be a women's division, but that plan never worked out, and they had tried to regroup and restart. They realized that they couldn't do it on their own, because there was a lot of resistance and someone suggested to them that they should get a woman attorney who would help them *pro bono*. That's how I got into the picture.

So, I met these women. I had no idea that this idea even existed. I had no idea that women wanted to do this and the more I heard of their story, the more inspired I became, and I became their director by default. By the way, if anybody has time, the documentary called *93 Queen* was created and was released in 2018, and that really shares the inside story of how I got involved and how we started the agency.

John Caher: Great. I have watched some of it, and I do intend to watch the rest of it. Now, what was the resistance based on? Why did anyone resist you?

Judge Freier: It really boiled down to politics. It boiled down to politics. Basically, it was a boys club, men who were accustomed to doing things their own way. In any department that was historically all male, when women came to the forefront and wanted] to join, there was pushback.

: In the Hasidic community, we were maybe like 40 years behind the rest of the world when it came to women stepping forward in this, but we weren't coming forward from a women's rights perspective or anything in terms of feminism. It was just in terms of women's modesty, which is held in a very high regard in the Hasidic community. But the men said that modesty is overridden because women aren't capable.

That's when I really took them to task. I said, "We are capable." I went to various rabbis and I said that the women are complaining that their modesty is being compromised when they're having emergencies. Since this community has such a high value on modesty I wanted the women to join Hatzolah. When the answer wasno, I was told, “Start your own.”

Now, I was told “start your own” because they knew it was so complicated and so difficult and so challenging. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. For 10 years we operated as a basic life support, first response unit, trying to advocate for our license to get our own

ambulance, and that took about 10 years. In December of 2020, we finally prevailed and won at the state level, because first we applied at the local level, to the regional EMS council, known as REMSCO, and we lost over there.

We appealed to the state, and then we won our license on the state level. But you need to understand a little bit of how this works because New York City doesn't give out any more licenses for ambulances—I think it has been that way for 30 years— unless you can file what's called a "certificate of need", a" CON," and prove that the existing resources are not sufficient and that you tried to ameliorate and you couldn't. We had to prove that the existing EMS in Brooklyn is all male in the Jewish community, and that there was a need for women to have women, and that we tried to join the men's EMS agency. We were told no, so therefore, we deserve our own license, and we prevailed and we got our own license. Now, we have our own ambulance.

John Caher: That's remarkable. I want to circle back and pursue something you mentioned earlier, you mentioned the modesty rules, and offline, you explained to me why those exist and why historically Hasidic women will keep their head covered. Can you just explain that for our listeners?

Judge Freier: All of Judaism falls under Jewish law and Jewish law is what we get from the Torah, The Five Books of Moses, as it's been interpreted in the Talmud, and it's vast, and it covers volumes and volumes. To a certain extent, there's a certain amount of elasticity and different communities and different rabbis have different interpretation on the rules.

One of the rules that we have in Judaism is about the dress, and it applies to men as well. Men have their rules, according to the Torah, how they're supposed to appear and how they're supposed to dress, the garments that they have to wear, and so do women, we have our rules.

Now, in the Hasidic community, what I think distinguishes us a little bit is that we go above and beyond the letter of the law. Anything that's a commandment or a mitzvah, we take it the next level. We sanctify and we glorify every mitzvah. When it comes to modesty, I guess the rules are a bit stricter than what you would see in a more, I'll use the word modern, but I don't know if it's really right interpretation or the right classification, but in a more modern community that does not appear to be as Hasidic.

Hasidism, really, it's a certain style in observance, because you shouldn't think that because someone is not Hasidic, they may not be as devoutly

religious as a Hasid. So, because your religious observance is based on the commandments, you could have somebody who's not Hasidic, but is very, very careful and sensitive to all the commandments.

It's the style of how we observe, and it's based on the teaching of the Baal Shem Tov, who lived in the 18th century, and his concept was we need to serve God with joy. The whole concept of Hasidism is based on observance with a heightened level of joy, as opposed to observance out of fear or unhappiness, or the threat of some punishment. That's not our religion.

Our religion is based on joy and appreciating every day and connecting to God every moment of your life. So, everything that you do should be done with a certain amount of connection to God. Nothing that we do is disconnected from God. Even if I'm doing something that's completely secular, I'm not doing it in a vacuum. It's all under my observance and my religion. Does that make sense?

John Caher: Yes, it does. Thank you for explaining it.

You seem like a contradiction, a modern career woman rooted to an ancient tradition. What do you say to those who might think that those two dynamics are mutually exclusive, that you can't do both.

Judge Freier: It's interesting because many years ago, when I made a decision to go to college and go to law school, I had the same question because I was raised with a concept that if you venture outside, you may not be as committed and as dedicated to your community and to Hasidism. I had to question that, and I said to myself, well, why does it have to be that way? Why does it have to be that I won't remain as committed to Hasidism?

This was my own personal journey, my own personal effort to try to figure this out. Are these two concepts mutually exclusive? Does it mean if I want to go into one world, I have to abandon the other? As I was going through my journey, I realized that the answer is no, you don't have to.

You can remain as committed as you want to be, as you are, to your religious values and still succeed in, whether it's the academic world, whether it's the medical world, whether it's the legal world, whichever profession you want to wander into, you don't have to compromise your religious values. I would say that applies to anybody from any religion.

We live in a great country, great state, great city. Maybe this didn't apply to my grandparents' generation when they lived in Eastern Europe, right before the Holocaust. I think that in their generation, you couldn't have it both ways, but I think today, we can.

John Caher: That's a wonderful answer.

I've only got one final question for you, and that is: If there was one thing you would like the non-Hasidic community to understand about you and your culture, what would it be?

Judge Freier: Often what you see from the outside is not what we are on the inside, so don't be judgmental. Don't be quick to make decisions about us. Speak to people and learn about who we are, because you may be very surprised, very, very surprised, to find out what a Hasidic life and culture is really like.

It would be my wish that after hearing this, people will say, "Oh, it's not what I thought it is, and it seems like it's beautiful. It's warm. It's a unique lifestyle." I'm willing to answer questions. If anybody wants to reach out to me, I welcome questions because I think that it's just so fascinating how rich our culture is and how little about it is usually available to the outside world.

John Caher: Judge, thank you so much for illuminating me and for your time and for doing this podcast. I hope you have a very joyous Passover week.

Judge Freier: Thank you.