

## *JEWISH LATIN PRINCESS*

SHIRA LANKIN SHEPS,  
FOUNDER OF THE LAYERS PROJECT MAGAZINE

### *EPISODE 50*

You're listening to Jewish Latin Princess Podcast by Yael. Every week get your dose of inspiration from the world's most uniquely talented Jewish women and from Yael herself. Seeking profound and practical ways to live a joyful, richer Jewish life? Welcome to Jewish Latin Princess Podcast.

And now, Jewish lifestyle expert and bilingual blogger at [www.jewishlatinprincess.com](http://www.jewishlatinprincess.com), your host, Yael.

**Yael Trusch:** During her early twenty's she was diagnosed with a chronic illness that prevented her from doing all the things she loved as a wife, mother of Jewish children, and social worker. She suffered in silence until one day she hit the publish button to a blog post in which she shared her illness and struggles with the world. She let go of shame and went on a leap of faith, trusting that sharing her story would not only help her but others as well. Indeed it did. You are listening to Jewish Latin Princess, I'm Yael Trusch, your host. Welcome to our 50<sup>th</sup> episode. I'm happy to be celebrating this milestone and joining me in this celebration is none other than the lovely Shira Lankin Sheps.

Shira is the creator of The Layers Project Magazine. Through this online magazine, she hopes to bring healing, empathy, and a sense of community among Jewish women by sharing their stories of struggle and recovery. Her portraits communicate a shared human experience and bring light to those featured as well as to thousands of readers. Shira and I talked about The Layers Project. Its mission and practical details like, how does she control the quality of the photography? How does she select the stories that she ends up publishing? How are people responding? And how are these women stories helping many others out there? And of course, Shira shares with us the entire personal journey that ultimately led to this beautiful

project. Stay tuned to get a discount code to your monthly subscription of The Layers Project magazine. Here is the delightful, Shira Lankin Sheps.

***[Theme Music]***

**YAEL TRUSCH:** Shira Lankin Sheps, my friend, welcome to Jewish Latin Princess.

**SHIRA SHEPS:** Thank you so much! I'm so excited to be here.

**YAEL TRUSCH:** I am so excited to be here and to talk about your new initiative, The Layers Project magazine, a beautiful project, and how you got there and so much more. So why don't we start first with what is The Layers Project magazine?

**SHIRA SHEPS:** So Layers Project started exactly a year ago. I am a social worker and a photographer and I decided to combine my two passions in life and I started a photojournalism-based blog where I interviewed Jewish women talking about the challenges and triumphs of their life. We were tackling a lot of taboo topics that had never been really talked about in this kind of way. Finding them with this very intimate photos and when I say intimate I mean looking at someone in the eyes while they are telling you their story. It just made filler. The blog took off and then this Chanukah, on the second night of Chanukah, we launched our Layers Project magazine. We found that, number one, there was so much of a response from the community that two things happen. First, I could not keep up with the response just by myself. I needed a team to come together, to work together, and there were too many voices. They were too many people that had things to say about the kind of singular, the profiles that we were doing was not enough. We wanted more voices. People had things to say and we wanted to share them.

**YAEL TRUSCH:** Wow! Why... it's really what is happening, Shira. It is just amazing how women are coming together and really forming these communities of support, of empathy, of connection. And you are facilitating this, so I think it is absolutely beautiful. You talked about the response of the community. What has been some of the things that stand out or that you see a thread you see coming from these responses?

**SHIRA SHEPS:** What is really very humbling is that the pieces that we share, the profiles which are these interviews with the photograph, but also the essay, the personal narrative essays that are written by community women not writers, just women who have a story to tell. They are being received in the most fascinating way for I have received hundreds upon hundreds of messages over the last year from women who have said to me, you know, Shira, I have never been able to articulate the way that I was feeling. I personally was in the infertility series. I literally had multiple messages from women who said, I have never been able to tell my loved ones what it was like for me to experience infertility. And when I was reading this profile, every single thing that she said resonate with me, validated my feelings, and I was able to send this profile to my husband, to my parents, to my siblings, to my friends. And for the first time in my life, I'm getting the support that I have always needed because now they understand. Just—

**Yael Trusch:** Hm. That is almost like by profiling one courageous person who is articulating this, were giving the voice to thousands of others with a shared experience.

**SHIRA SHEPS:** Absolutely. Just yesterday, I got a message from a woman who said to me that prior to our—because this month in the magazine we are talking about the BRCA genetic mutation. Genetic mutation that causes ovarian cancer and breast cancer that is extremely prevalent. It is like 1:40 Ashkenazi Jewish women will have the BRCA gene as opposed to the 1:500 in the general population. And I had a woman who reached out to me saying, before you started this month's theme, I just got my testing for the BRCA gene, and I just found out that I am BRCA positive. And I have been reading the content in the magazine this month, and it has helped me tremendously to process and understand, and validate my feelings and look forward to the future. And also learn about my options and that was just so validating because when we reach out and we stand up and we are authentic and we are honest and we share real things—

**Yael Trusch:** Right.

**SHIRA SHEPS:** And we breakdown stigma about taboo topics that don't need to be taboo, not only we just bust the doors wide open to connection

and healing across the board personally, in our communities, and that is what we are seeking to do.

**Yael Trusch:** Wow! You just reminded me, I had on Episode 30, I had Stacy Middleman. She wrote the book, Dear Cancer, Love Stacy. She is a BRCA gene carrier and she is a survivor twice. She has a fascinating story so I guess I'll connect you. Yes, absolutely! So if you were to say the mission of the magazine, how would you state it?

**Shira Sheps:** The mission of the magazine is to create in depth insights on the lives of Jewish women to flush out our stories from becoming one dimensional to three dimensional characters so they are often, Jewish women are kind of portrayed as just like, you know, just kind of flat characters. We are not usually the protagonist in the story and Jewish women have so much in her life and so—there is so much to us. And so the purpose is to flush that out and to really create a community of connection and healing through honesty and authenticity. The initiative is to also to create an authentic space on known social media. Social media is typically so fake. There are all these façades that we put up in our social media—

**Yael Trusch:** Right.

**Shira Sheps:** We post the happy pictures but we don't post the mess. We crop out the mess. Life isn't Instaperfect. Life is messy, life is complicated, life is hard.

**Yael Trusch:** Yes.

**Shira Sheps:** Then when we can be honest about what makes our lives messy, complicated, and hard; we also can talk about what makes our lives beautiful and that can be strengthening for us to can take control of our narratives, not to become victimized by our challenges because they are stigmatized by our communities. And also can be cathartic for the audience because regardless of what you are experiencing in life, everybody is dealing with something as challenging.

**Yael Trusch:** That is right.

**Shira Sheps:** And you don't have to be dealing with infertility to gain something from the infertility series. Because when you see that woman and she tells you how she deals with her challenges and the meaning that

she makes of it, and how resilient she is, then you can learn from her resilience and apply it back to your own life. And that is basically what we are trying to do.

**Yael Trusch:** You talked about challenges, Shira, and I understand that in truth, this project came from your own personal challenge. Can you tell us a little bit about that? What was the impetus, the initial impetus?

**Shira Sheps:** Yeah, I like to say that the Layers Project was born from a place of pain and mind me to make me love it. Basically, when I was twenty-three, perhaps? Twenty-three, twenty-four, I began to develop a kind of chronic illness that continued to get progressively worse over the span of five years. To the point where at the end, I was bedbound and terrified of living and terribly ashamed, terribly ashamed of being ill.

**Yael Trusch:** Were you married at this point already?

**Shira Sheps:** Yeah, I was married with two kids.

**Yael Trusch:** Okay. Is this illness like are you healed or is it something that is going to continue for life?

**Shira Sheps:** No, no. I, well, I'll tell you the story. So, basically I got all these different diagnoses that were—

**Yael Trusch:** Okay.

**Shira Sheps:** Never resolving into anything correct and I just got sicker, and sicker, and sicker. And again, I said that I was very ashamed of being sick I am a perfectionist and I like—I'm very independent. I like to do everything myself and I am like to be strong and I like to support others, I am a nurturer by nature and all of these things were taken. Illness took all these things away from me. In terms of my strength, my physical strength and it kind of stripped me down, it stripped my personality down to its barest parts and I had to learn who I really was on the inside and make meaning and kind of accept that that chapter of my life, while I was going through it, I told myself that this was a test from God.

**Yael Trusch:** Mm-hm.

**Shira Sheps:** HaShem made me to be this way, because I was so angry. I was so angry. Why? Why would HaShem take this away from me?

I have all these good things that I wanted to do. And then I told myself, wow, there is something I need to be learning here and I'm not going to get better until I learn it so I better investigate and spent a lot of time investigating the shame that I felt about being ill which was correlated not to the illness because there is nothing to be ashamed about being sick. It was about losing the role that was so precious to me.

**Yael Trusch:** So how did it go about that investigation? Journaling... I mean what is that—

**Shira Sheps:** I just started writing. I did a lot of poetry, a lot of journaling and I... so this is what happened; I wrote, and I wrote, I wrote and I wrote. And I would submit my writing to all these different publications and they would say to me, Shira, we loved what you are writing and we love what you are saying but you have to put your name on this because I was asking to be anonymous.

**Yael Trusch:** Aha!

**Shira Sheps:** Because I was so ashamed. People did not know that I was sick. You would not have known I was sick until you noticed that you had not seen me for a while.

**Yael Trusch:** Wait! I need to ask about this. What do you mean people didn't know you were sick? You live in a community. You are an observant Jewish woman, how does that happen?

**Shira Sheps:** Because Jewish women very often are relegated to their homes anyway. You know not every woman goes to Shul and you do not necessarily—I was doing the bare minimum of functioning in society but my closest friends knew that I was ill but, you know.

**Yael Trusch:** Okay. So your closest friends, you had their support?

**Shira Sheps:** Absolutely! Absolutely, but again for them it was very hard because it is hard to relate to somebody who is chronically ill and when your life is moving and progressing and mine was not. Very stale and very stagnant, it is hard to relate. And it is hard to understand and I had friends who were amazing and stood by me and knew when to check in and when to let me be and then there were some friends that couldn't really handle it.

It was too painful for them to see me suffer and they did not know how to support me.

**Yael Trusch:** Right.

**Shira Sheps:** And so that was challenging for them which I really understood.

**Yael Trusch:** Right. And very often some of our closest friends are not in the same city as we lived in and so that is also, you know.

**Shira Sheps:** Absolutely! That has to do it.

**Yael Trusch:** So you are writing, you are journaling, you are sharing the story, but you are not really sharing the story because nobody knows who is this happening to. So what happens next?

**Shira Sheps:** I am being told over and over again, Shira, you have something to say. But if you won't stand up and say it, it is not going to help anybody. And so—

**Yael Trusch:** This is an interesting point. It is helping you but maybe it is not helping the same, in the deep way it is going to help you because really it was not helping others.

**Shira Sheps:** They also said it is not going to be interesting to people if you won't put your name behind this, you're kind of perpetuating this situation that you are in.

**Yael Trusch:** Ah, yes. The shame and the silence and all that.

**Shira Sheps:** On Chanukah, two years ago. I can't believe it was only two years ago. Chanukah two years ago, on the second night of Chanukah, I wrote my first blog post about being ill. And I get out there and I made meaning of it in the best way that I could, explaining that I understood this was a test of faith and I called my blog, *Emunah Baleilot*, it is having darkness, because that was how it felt like for me. I got within—I pushed, I clicked publish...

**Yael Trusch:** Yeah?

**Shira Sheps:** And my heart was like pounding, pounding, pounding.

**Yael Trusch:** Right.

**SHIRA SHEPS:** All of a sudden—ding, ding, ding-ding-ding... like the comments and the messages are blowing in like overwhelming. Just of support, people reaching out saying that I did not know. Can I be helpful to you? Or saying that, I didn't know and I also am experiencing something challenging like this and I just remembered there, sitting there in front of my computer after months and years of being isolated, socially isolated because I was, I isolated myself, just feeling so overwhelmed with gratitude and a connection. And then, two weeks later, well, within that week, my grandmother passed away.

**Yael Trusch:** Oh, goodness!

**SHIRA SHEPS:** And I wrote a blog post eulogizing her and sharing what it was like to lose her and sharing my pain. Someone had shared it, a woman in my community where I grew up saw this blog post and then she was like, oh? Let me see what else is on this site and then she went and she saw the original post and she called up my mother, we she called my mother, she called a friend and said, I know what is wrong with Shira. I know what she has, my son had this. And within, this is within two weeks, I had an accurate diagnosis and a new doctor and I began my recovery and I believed that it was because I stood up and put it out there, let go of the shame and framed it within the framework of faith and that is why I believe that I got better.

**Yael Trusch:** This is unreal! So, wait, after how long of being missed diagnosed?

**SHIRA SHEPS:** Five years.

**Yael Trusch:** Five years, and then you hit publish and within two weeks —

**SHIRA SHEPS:** Yeah.

**Yael Trusch:** You are on the road to finding recovery.

**SHIRA SHEPS:** Mm-hm.

**Yael Trusch:** And first of all, how did people even find this blog post? I mean it is not that easy to just find a new—did you put it on social media? Is that what you did?

**SHIRA SHEPS:** Facebook, yeah! I posted it on—

**Yael Trusch:** Ah, okay.

**SHIRA SHEPS:** It was like it was time. I was just sick of being sick, I was sick of... I had imprisoned myself in shame!

**Yael Trusch:** Yes.

**SHIRA SHEPS:** And it was enough.

**Yael Trusch:** Did you at all worry about how it would affect your children or your husband? Anything? Did anything like that cross your mind?

**SHIRA SHEPS:** No, because I will tell you why?

**Yael Trusch:** Uh-huh?

**SHIRA SHEPS:** Because keeping that secret was hurting my husband and my children, because they couldn't have the support that they needed.

**Yael Trusch:** Yes.

**SHIRA SHEPS:** My husband had to keep my secret. And that was very, very, challenging for him because he needed support. And so basically what happened was I continued writing on this blog for a few months and I started and I got better. Within... by the summertime I was already significantly better and all I wanted to do, and I was a Social Worker by training, all I wanted to do was make beautiful things. I wanted to be—I wanted to capture memories, I wanted to live life, I wanted to be out there. I also wanted to do something physically active. I want to challenge myself to, in my recovery, and to be as physically active as I could. And so I started a photography business.

**Yael Trusch:** Did you know photography before?

**SHIRA SHEPS:** No! I mean I had studied it when I was sick. It was something that I took up because I was relegated to kind of the quiet of being ill and photography you can kind of sit and study light and study beautiful things and it was a really good, it was really cathartic for me. So I had developed the skill set and I was like okay, I'll take it to the next level. So I started pushing out this photography business and it was going really well but it felt like by January, I felt like I was not quite there yet. I felt like I

hadn't landed where I was supposed to be, like it was an introduction to something else and so I said to myself, maybe I should make like a photojournalism project, I was really interested in photojournalism. Maybe I will do something and I'm wracking my brain trying to find a topic and I was like, I know. I know what I need to be doing. I need to be interviewing Jewish women. And I basically came to this conclusion that why don't I give back to what was given to me? Meaning, not everybody is going to write a blog, but they might be willing to be profiled to share their story and then receive this kind of outpouring of support and connection and healing.

**Yael Trusch:** Yes.

**Shira Sheps:** It could be healing for them, it could be healing for them to take control of their own narratives, and also healing for the audience to talk about things that need to be spoken about. And so I started this process and it was everything that I hoped it would be and it felt like it was so basher that I had experience all these things so I could bring catharsis and healing to other people. And so when we launched our magazine, we launched it on the second night of Chanukah, which was the second anniversary of the first time that I took the step. And so that's how the Layers Project was born.

**Yael Trusch:** That is such an incredible story. Shira, you dug into the shame and you kept telling me about the shame and I think it is probably something that a lot of people could relate to, but where did you discover— was there a source? Can we pinpoint a source to shame? You mentioned that you are a perfectionist, so try to connect the dots for me a little bit.

**Shira Sheps:** Sure! Absolutely! In our community, women especially, but men have a lot of pressures, too.

**Yael Trusch:** Yes.

**Shira Sheps:** But the pressures for women are very specific in the sense—

**Yael Trusch:** Tell us.

**Shira Sheps:** You need to have a career. Most people—many people have a career especially in the Jewish communities where we lived, we really required dual income to just afford to live. Not that anyone really has

any stigma against being a stay at home mom, but just to afford to live in many Jewish communities, a dual income is required. So you need to have a profession. You need to be an amazing mom. You need to have a whole bunch of kids. You need to be an amazing wife. Your house has to be clean, you have to cook. We call that cooking and there is endless... you are a daughter, you are a sister, and our families are so closely knit. There are endless responsibility. Endless burden. Endless claims on your time. And I wasn't living up to it.

I had I was just wasn't moving up to it. I developed PCOS in the mix of all of this, and so I was experiencing secondary infertility as a result. I was not physically strong so there were a lot of things I could not do. I was very weak, I couldn't do all the cooking, and all the cleaning, and all the energy that I have I reserved for my children.

So I don't think that my children lost much in the process, but because much, literally, every ounce of what anything that I had I gave to them, but I didn't give anything to me.

**Yael Trusch:** Or to your husband probably?

**Shira Sheps:** Well, that was... he had to—it wasn't that I wasn't giving to him but he had to devote a significant amount time and—he was a caregiver.

**Yael Trusch:** Right.

**Shira Sheps:** He learned as a caregiver. And so, as somebody, in terms of role, I am the oldest child in my family and the oldest daughter. I'm the oldest grand-daughter, I was always—

**Yael Trusch:** Uh-huh.

**Shira Sheps:** Active and doing for others and it had to stop. It all just stopped in its tracks.

**Yael Trusch:** Right.

**Shira Sheps:** I didn't participate in the way that I wanted to. And I am a passionate person and I just ate all the energy that it took to be passionate I couldn't even maintain.

**Yael Trusch:** So let us flip it to now. You are healed, you are doing the Layers—give us a picture of what your life is like now? The renewal. I want to hear about the renewal.

**Shira Sheps:** Renewal. So it is amazing. Now I run The Layers Project magazine and I am the CEO and publisher.

**Yael Trusch:** You are still living in the same Jewish community, right?

**Shira Sheps:** The same community. We have a staff of editors and clinical directors, and interns and I manage the staff, I manage the business. I am writing, I am going everywhere and I am photographing. One of the big thing was I always wanted to return to Israel. That was always—Israel, I'm so passionate about Israel and being sick was one of the hardest things was that I couldn't go back. My brother made Aliyah, three years ago and before he left I wrote him this kind of like devastating poem.

**Yael Trusch:** Oh?

**Shira Sheps:** Kind of describing to him how painful it was that I couldn't visit him, I was afraid that his life would go on and I wouldn't be a part of it.

**Yael Trusch:** Wow. Where are your parents, Shira?

**Shira Sheps:** So my parents just made Aliyah this summer. My sister just made Aliyah this summer. You have to imagine my family—

**Yael Trusch:** Uh-huh.

**Shira Sheps:** The trajectory was to Israel and I was too sick to get on an airplane and so this was very painful for me and so I worked and I worked and I worked in terms of rebuilding my strength and for the first time in eleven years, I made it back to Israel this fall. I went to visit my parents and my sister and my brother. And then my brother got married in January, and we went back.

**Yael Trusch:** Wow! Mazel tov!

**Shira Sheps:** And we actually filmed this video, I call it redeemed by Zion, where I share a piece of writing about how I used to dream about going back to the Kotel, and being back in Yerushalaim, and how it was a

dream and it was something that I had written when I was sick and we filmed the first time I took my daughter to the Kotel.

**Yael Trusch:** Wow!

**Shira Sheps:** And super imposed this poem, this dream this daydream, and basically showed the transition between this daydream and it become a memory. And it was so artfully profound for me. I honestly did it for me. I mean it was very well received but it was something that I... it was the first like piece of art that I created in this way and it was so utterly profound for me and so meaningful and even now, when I am having a hard time, or if I have a bad day, I watch this video and at the end of the video, at the end of the poem is basically talking about the sweetness of redemption, personal redemption, national redemption. I actually called it, the video where I took my two kids to the Kotel and I cried, I'm like sobbing in front of the Kotel while I'm dabbing and my kids goes like, looking at it like it's really made of gold and it was very sweet but—

**Yael Trusch:** Is it up on the Layers Project website?

**Shira Sheps:** Yes, it's on our website, it is on our Facebook page, it is called Redeemed by Zion. It is a great video and so it was—

**Yael Trusch:** So it doesn't—

**Shira Sheps:** Yes, go on. Sorry.

**Yael Trusch:** So Shira, you... how do you... you travel to take these pictures and you talked about even from the very beginning you really wanted to capture the facial, your profile person looking at the camera. How do you control the photography? I mean you cannot possibly travel everywhere you get a person, right?

**Shira Sheps:** This is good question. Thus far, I have done most of the photography... we've done twenty-five profiles over the last year. Two of them have been done by other photographers. One was actually my profile where I shared the story, the birth of the project which is how we launched the magazine. And then another one, was done actually because they was a snow storm in the location where I was supposed to go and so someone filled in for me and they did tremendous beautiful work. I think that going forward in the future depending on where the stories take place, we are

going to have residential photographers in that area. I think I'll always going to be conduct the interviews and write the interviews, but definitely we are going to have input from other photographers. We love to have input from other photographers. I think the Layers Project magazine is actually successful because of our photojournalism.

**Yael Trusch:** Right.

**Shira Sheps:** Because it is another element that other magazines don't have necessarily and so we are always looking to expand that content.

**Yael Trusch:** Yeah, and it is such a big part of what you do, I mean the quality of photography and as a blogger myself I know that is so important, so that is why I asked the question. I think it is amazing. Once you get to that point you are going to be expanding other places and involving other photographers, I mean, that is just awesome. Shira, now your life is more public. It was helpful to your husband, but still how did your family feel about this more public life let us say?

**Shira Sheps:** Which family?

**Yael Trusch:** Your parents? Your siblings? Your spouse?

**Shira Sheps:** Oh, they are thrilled.

**Yael Trusch:** Okay.

**Shira Sheps:** You are suggesting that they wouldn't be thrilled because I have disclosed that I have been sick?

**Yael Trusch:** I don't know? Maybe there was mixed feelings, maybe there was resistance, maybe... I don't know?

**Shira Sheps:** No.

**Yael Trusch:** Cool!

**Shira Sheps:** They—I think that everybody feels like I'm in my element.

**Yael Trusch:** I love it.

**Shira Sheps:** And I made a full recovery, I mean I still have bad days just like anybody else would, but they are just so—my life has become meaningful again.

**Yael Trusch:** It is such an incredible turn around. It is like literally it flipped.

**Shira Sheps:** Yeah! My husband always said that once I began the process of recovery, I would be like—I always described myself as like being a car, like with an engine that was turned on that was locked behind the garage door. It was hard, like it sits there and it sits there and sits there... it's kind of like stewing.

**Yael Trusch:** Yeah!

**Shira Sheps:** Like waiting, ready. Like when the door opens it is just ready to shoot out, that is what I was like all these years. My brain was as creative as ever but I didn't have the energy to act on it so then when I got the energy back, I took off, I sort of like shoot out of the garage door like very quickly, and I do things very quickly like I decided November to launch the magazine and by the middle of December it was launched.

**Yael Trusch:** Good for you!

**Shira Sheps:** It was crazy! We had built the whole staff and built the whole organization within six weeks. It is just how I functioned and my family was thrilled.

**Yael Trusch:** That's great.

**Shira Sheps:** That I'm alive and well and doing what I love and making meaning and doing something meaningful and helping other people and so —

**Yael Trusch:** That is un—

**Shira Sheps:** The disclosing of illness, I think they are very proud of me.

**Yael Trusch:** Oh, my goodness. I can only imagine. It is really an unbelievable story. What with the women who, the twenty-five women who, we have heard about what the community at large has responded and very positively and how it has helped them. Do you get feedback from those twenty-five participants?

**Shira Sheps:** Absolutely. It is a tremendous experience being profiled. I'll tell you why. First off, we don't often in life have the opportunity to take

control of our narratives in the public space. I had a lot of women who are profiled saved me, people say things about me. Whether it is someone who had been newly divorced and people are, oh, what happened to their marriage or about body image or about health, about fertility. Whatever it is, people talk. People they talk. You know it's true and so this was an opportunity for women to say, this is really what happened. This is what my life is like. Not only this is what my life is like, but this is the emotional experience behind it and people learn, the audience learns. I had so much feedback from women saying like, I never knew anything about this topic and now my eyes are opened and I am going to be more sensitive going forward.

**Yael Trusch:** Yes.

**Shira Sheps:** For the women being profiled, it is very cathartic to just put it out there and let go of the shame. And what happens is they get so much positive feedback from the community in a supportive way, but also people reach out to them looking for guidance. Like people who had similar things.

**Yael Trusch:** Now they can be a light unto others.

**Shira Sheps:** Exactly. I know myself. When I finally told my story in the project, I was in December, so one of the last ones. Ten women reached out to me saying I think I have what you had, can you help me?

**Yael Trusch:** What?

**Shira Sheps:** Seven of those women are on their way to recovery, no joke.

**Yael Trusch:** Oh, my, gosh! That is unbelievable. That was just an amaze—

**Shira Sheps:** Happens time and time again! With all these different topics that we are touching. People are making connections with other women who gone through similar experiences. Taboos are being kind of pushed to the side and stigma is being broken down, and these women are becoming what I call Jewlebrities. Like people recognize them. Like, somebody who participated in the infertility series, she moved to a new community and she met someone at Kiddush and she is like, oh, you know,

you look so familiar, do I remember you from school, do it oh! Whatever she would and she walked away, and she came back and she was, I know you! You are from the Layers Project.

**YAEL TRUSCH:** Oh, my, gosh!

**SHIRA SHEPS:** So being recognized in places and people just share. I know for me, wherever I go people are disclosing personal, they'll say things like, I don't know why I am telling you this but I feel that you are someone who can understand. And I think what is happening is they are just not enough of that in our communities where people feel safe to be, to admit that their lives aren't perfect. Nobody's life is perfect. And most people pretend that they are and so people are just kind of breaking down, people who are exposed to this or in our Layers Community, kind of like breaking down these barriers and reaching out to each other and sharing and strengthening. And it is so validating for someone to be like hey, I don't have what you have, or I do have what you have but I'm also going through something tough and so your feelings are validated and it is very normalizing, and in a community where everything is you have to be perfect for our *shiduchim* and perfect for—to seem like a perfect family and that's our value which is not, it is not real, it is not productive and it sure is not healthy.

**YAEL TRUSCH:** Hashtag, lets get real, right?

**SHIRA SHEPS:** Yeah, that's a good hashtag.

**YAEL TRUSCH:** That is what we need to do. See, we created it Shira, right here. I love it. Now having said that as a photojournalist, you must get sometimes stories that might be great or whatever but maybe it is not the angle that you need. Has that ever happened and how did you manage it?

**SHIRA SHEPS:** All the time.

**YAEL TRUSCH:** The angles you are looking for.

**SHIRA SHEPS:** All the time. I always say, I have an agenda with every story that I tell. I get hundreds of submission, I have an intake file that is like crazy sick that I had to hire an intern to sort through and to organize for me. Lots of women want to tell their stories but it says in our submissions page, and I stand by this that not every story benefits from being told.

First, number one, that every personality can handle this. It is very public. It will be read by thousands and thousands people. You are exposing yourself in a really vulnerable way. Whatever you are telling us, whatever this challenge is, even if you are in the middle of it, you have to have processed it already. I am a therapist but I am not your therapist. This is not therapy. This is something that has to be processed in the past so that you can have healthy meaning for it in the future and create a healthy experience for you and the audience. This is for someone who is stuck in the middle of a traumatic event.

**Yael Trusch:** Yes, I think that is key. No, you hit the nail on the head.

**Shira Sheps:** Absolutely! It is not healthy. So I am extremely selective about the stories that I would tell. Extremely selective. I am also very cognizant of the fact that when you offer a reader pain, you also have to offer them comfort. That doesn't mean that every story has to have a happy ending because many stories do not but I think it is important for our audience if the reason we are telling the story is to help them make meaning and to help them have an emotionally experience. And to breakdown the stigma but to learn from it. The person being profiled has to have made that meaning, that healthy meaning. And that in itself, provides comfort, you know what I mean?

**Yael Trusch:** Absolutely.

**Shira Sheps:** Whether it is faith, whether it is acceptance, whether it's kind of like a gracious sharing looking for connectivity, it has to be made already for me to want to tell that story.

**Yael Trusch:** Right.

**Shira Sheps:** Because we need it. And frankly I need it because I'm living in that story for a week when I'm telling it. It is like twenty four hours a day, the photographs, the images; I interviewed them and then I recorded the interview and I then I listened to it again and then I write verbatim and then I edit it for clarity, but I'm living in that story for a week. And so if it is just like an open, gaping wound of pain it doesn't help anybody and it is too painful to share, it is not ready to be shared.

**Yael Trusch:** It is not a source of light yet. It will one day.

**SHIRA SHEPS:** It will be one day, but I am very selective so, so that was a great question. Seriously!

**YAEL TRUSCH:** So who is your audience right now? Who are these Jewish women who are reading the Layers Project magazine?

**SHIRA SHEPS:** Ninety-one percent of our followers are Orthodox women between the ages of twenty-four and forty. All spectrum of Orthodoxy, from Hasidic to Yeshivish to modern to very modern.

**YAEL TRUSCH:** Right. But you are not just profiling people on those communities necessarily? It just happens—

**SHIRA SHEPS:** Not necessarily. Actually, specifically, we have no, The Layers Project magazine is nondenominational and apolitical. It is a source of human experience, without labels. So if I am interviewing a modern Orthodox woman from Teaneck, New Jersey.

You will not know where she is from. You will not know how she identifies. Maybe you will make your own conclusions based on the way that she looks, but all you need to know is she is a Jewish woman, and if you are a Jewish woman that sameness is enough to connect, to understand a human experience. And that is the point. For me, I feel like there is a lot of *sinat chinam* in the world. And I feel like even in the Orthodox community, in the little spaces that divide us, there is just not enough understanding, and so if we strip ourselves of this labels and we tell human stories that can apply to anybody, then we can come closer together as a community, as a nation, as people. And I think we would all be better for it.

**YAEL TRUSCH:** You almost want to make me have more people from outside these communities read the Layers Project magazine because there are also so many lines of division from lack of knowledge of—

**SHIRA SHEPS:** Absolutely! And we do have plenty of readers. We absolutely do and we want them. We absolutely want them and we want to tell their stories too because on the other side there is a lot of Orthodox people that would love me to learn more about what that lifestyle is like but it is not even about lifestyle. It is not about religion.

**YAEL TRUSCH:** It is about the experience. They are having it, too.

**SHIRA SHEPS:** Yeah! It is about being a human.

**Yael Trusch:** Woman.

**Shira Sheps:** Woman. You could be experiencing infertility, and you could be Hasidic, you could be reformed. It doesn't really matter.

**Yael Trusch:** Right.

**Shira Sheps:** Yes. If you have something to share, that is meaningful that can help the other person. If we strip ourselves of the labels then you will be able to access that truth that we can share together.

**Yael Trusch:** Absolutely. So beautiful, Shira, absolutely beautiful. I am a big fan. Shira, let us do something fun that I do at the end of all my interviews and this is called JLP fill in the blanks. And this is where I give you an open ended sentence and you fill it with the first thing that comes to mind, okay?

**Shira Sheps:** I feel so nervous, okay!

**Yael Trusch:** I think you would be great at it, so let us do it. I am Shira Lankin Sheps, and I feel most spiritual when?

**Shira Sheps:** That is a really good question. I feel most spiritual when I listen to music. When I am singing, when I am listening to music, Jewish music specifically, that is when I feel the most. That is when my soul wakes up.

**Yael Trusch:** I love it.

**Shira Sheps:** Yes.

**Yael Trusch:** It is so, it is what the Rabbi say that the nigun is the pen of the soul. That is the highest form of art in terms of its spirituality.

**Shira Sheps:** Yeah, I definitely feel. I mean my name is Shira, so you know.

**Yael Trusch:** Yes! Yes.

**Shira Sheps:** Exactly. It is innate to me, but that—especially singing with other women, with beautiful harmonies, it is its own special form of tefillah. It actually for me, I can access spiritual spaces that I cannot access on my own or and it is very rare actually to be in a group of women and singing like that or even just like, I love a good Friday night spiritual minyan

where there is singing, like, uh! I get that it like recharge that I need for like my whole week that is like unbelievable.

**Yael Trusch:** Yes, it is. I can totally relate. My favorite mitzvah or when I feel most connected with is?

**Shira Sheps:** Veahavta L'reacha Kamocho

**Yael Trusch:** Hm. I just had another guest tell me that. So beautiful.

**Shira Sheps:** Yeah, I think it is just a very universal—it is basically describing empathy.

**Yael Trusch:** Yeah. And describing what you are doing professionally now which is amazing.

**Shira Sheps:** Yeah.

**Yael Trusch:** My fondest, sweetest Jewish memory is?

**Shira Sheps:** Oh, it is definitely going to be something with my family, with my grandparents who are holocaust survivors and just kind of the transmission of so many years of the transmission of their traditions and their culture and it was—my grandparents are so formative in my life and it is definitely, all of them, they are there in my parents, in my siblings; my family is the root of my Yiddishkite and so I just really... I feel so connected to the transmission of whatever they gave to us.

**Yael Trusch:** Shira, where did you grow up?

**Shira Sheps:** Oh! I grew up in a —but actually my father was a conservative Rabbi when I was growing up so I was born in Philadelphia. I grew up till I was nine in Long Island in West Hampstead and then I moved to Miami Beach.

**Yael Trusch:** Oh! That's awesome.

**Shira Sheps:** I was in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and then I spent the rest of my adolescence in Hellenpark New Jersey

**Yael Trusch:** Oh, wow!

**Shira Sheps:** We call it a PK, a preacher's kid, you know, where the Rabbis, they moved around and they get shlepped along with them

**Yael Trusch:** So, wait! You grew up in a conservative household and then when did the transition to Orthodoxy happened?

**Shira Sheps:** So I grew up in a very traditional conservative households, so like none-egalitarian, meaning that women were not participating in the services in the same way they do now. And we were so Shomer Shabbat mainly at home because again it was very traditional. When I was eleven or twelve I got involved in NCSY.

**Yael Trusch:** Mm-hm.

**Shira Sheps:** And as a preacher's kid as they say, you spend a lot of time in Shul. And in the conservative movement at that time, all the Shuls that we were, that my father was the Rabbi of, was dying. There was no spirituality for me there that I connected to. Maybe other people did but I did not connect to anything there. And I went to NCSY, and I felt a spark. I mean there were sparks in my home, because my parents are deeply spiritual people. They would sing, and they would have guests but it was not like communal in the sense.

**Yael Trusch:** Yes.

**Shira Sheps:** It was family so these were my grandparents and my siblings and my parents and that was beautiful and sacred to me. So that was my basis. And I always went to Yeshiva because my parents wanted me to have a Jewish education, I always went to Yeshiva. But then when I went to NCSY, all of the sudden there was like this spark inside of me like lit up and when I moved to Hellenpark I was eleven years old and honestly it was totally natural. I mean, I went to Yeshiva like the expectation that the cognitive dissonance between like living a conservative life outside and then being educated in an Orthodox way is just not, obviously something is going to give.

**Yael Trusch:** Uh-huh!

**Shira Sheps:** So my parents will walked to the conservative synagogue and I will walk to the Orthodox Shul a block over. And over the years, my parents came on over and they left the conservative movement. My dad was actually the head of the conservative movement of Jersey, and he left the conservative movement and all my siblings went to frum institution and

my parents are very religious they lived in Chashmonaim now and that is kind of the story.

**Yael Trusch:** Shira, look at you! You are a total trailblazer. I mean, come on! This is unbelievable.

**Shira Sheps:** Well, I mean—

**Yael Trusch:** It is amazing!

**Shira Sheps:** What is amazing is my parents are ever evolving. Unbelievably capable of accepting change. Most people don't like change. We are growing, always changing, always evolving and so comfortable with it and they embraced it. They embraced their spirituality and a lot of people are not like that. And so I am not going to take credit for their choices and their evolution because they are always deeply spiritual. They just went to the places where they found that spirituality. And my father was a conservative Rabbi, but then he went and got a doctorate in another degree so that he could leave that professional sphere and move on and do other things and those are his choices and I won't take credit for them because I don't deserve to get credit for them. They are—and my siblings, too! My siblings chose where they wanted to go to school and as a family we have a really beautiful, everybody is—actually they are unusual. We are all very similar, not necessarily in temperament but in the things that we love and the things that we are passionate about and I absolutely attribute that to my parents who are very passionate people and instill tremendous values in us. And so I will not take credit for any of their evolution.

**Yael Trusch:** It sounds like such a beautiful family, Shira. So beautiful. How many siblings?

**Shira Sheps:** I have three. I have a sister and I have two brothers.

**Yael Trusch:** Nice. Something I wished I had learned about Judaism growing up is?

**Shira Sheps:** Something I wished I had learned? Hm? Like something I knew now you mean?

**Yael Trusch:** Yeah. Something you know now and in hindsight—

**Shira Sheps:** Ah! Well, this is just particular to my learning Torah.

**Yael Trusch:** Tell us.

**Shira Sheps:** When I was a child, I understood the difference between Medrash and Pshat

**Yael Trusch:** Hm.

**Shira Sheps:** That is the thing that I wish I knew. For me personally, I connected to Torah in a much deeper, stronger, rooted way when I read Shatnez as it was as opposed to the way that Parsha portrayed the characters in the story. It made them realer and more authentic and more human and the work that I do, like it is not surprising, but I related to those characters much stronger because I think in my opinion, when you think that somebody is perfect, you don't necessarily feel like you can achieve a level of perfection and so you feel like you can't, you can never attain their level. It is not you can't attain the levels of the people in Torah, but to know that someone is imperfect means that you can be good and be imperfect too. And so as a human, we are imperfect and so that felt like Torah can be more relatable to me, could be stronger, deeply rooted in me because I am imperfect.

**Yael Trusch:** What a cool answer. When I give Tzedakah, I like to give to?

**Shira Sheps:** Ah, New Jersey Yachad!

**Yael Trusch:** What is New Jersey Yachad?

**Shira Sheps:** Ah, okay. So Yachad is the special needs organization that is run by the Orthodox Union here in America. And they also have in Israel and so New Jersey Yachad is actually where I had my first placement when I was in social work school and I assisted them all these years and actually just, my husband and I at the gala this fall. And they are an incredible organization. They are running amazing programs and offering amazing services for children and young adults with mental and physical disabilities and they are just an amazing crew. I love it.

**Yael Trusch:** That is amazing! I am going to make sure to put a link to that if anybody is interested.

**Shira Sheps:** Yes! Please do.

**Yael Trusch:** Awesome! Okay. And finally, I am Shira Lankin Sheps, and today I am most grateful for?

**Shira Sheps:** Today I am most grateful to be getting older.

**Yael Trusch:** Wow!

**Shira Sheps:** Yeah. You know, I think that there is a big shift, I turned thirty last year and I think that there is a big shift from your twenties to your thirties and even just looking at the mirror and seeing fine lines, finding a gray hair. You know I found a little gray hair recently and I was like, oh, my gosh! I found a gray hair. And I am just so immeasurably grateful to be getting older and to be seeing signs of age and wellness and to be living a full life being a mother and a wife and a professional and to be making a difference and to be doing meaningful work. I really feel like the work that I am doing is synthesizing all of my strengths and all of my passions and to be getting older is just a blessing and life is getting better and better and so I am very grateful to have bar mitzvah.

**Yael Trusch:** Wow, so, so cool. And just wait until you turn forty. It gets better, I am telling you.

**Shira Sheps:** Wait! I am telling you, I love getting older. I can't wait.

**Yael Trusch:** It gets better. Something happens after you turn forty where you are so absolutely comfortable in your skin although you are now. So I can even imagine what it is going to be for you but it is going to be amazing, but—

**Shira Sheps:** I can't wait.

**Yael Trusch:** What?

**Shira Sheps:** I can't wait. I am very... I have noticed that myself. As I get older, obviously I made significant transition but as I get older I get more comfortable and I understand myself, my challenges...

**Yael Trusch:** Yes.

**Shira Sheps:** I have raised them and knowing all your parts and accepting them is something that comes with age. And I am really deeply involved in that journey and grateful to be so.

**Yael Trusch:** And the truth is if you think about it, this is a Jewish value. I mean, we, contrary to popular culture in society which does not value age, we actually value age.

**Shira Sheps:** Never thought of it that way.

**Yael Trusch:** Yes. All right, Shira, you've done an amazing job. I am so thrilled that we got to connect. I am so thrilled that everybody got to know a lot more about the Layers Project magazine. So tell us where we will find the Layers Project magazine and you have a special code for us?

**Shira Sheps:** Yes! Okay, so you can find us at on Facebook, on Instagram, or in Twitter. You could check out our website, [www.thelayersprojectmagazine.com](http://www.thelayersprojectmagazine.com) and we are going to have a special code for your listeners. JLP you'll get—the price will go from \$7.99 per subscription to \$5, which is a great deal. Come and join our community, be a part of this process. You might even see Yael there. So be a part of our community and this incredible healing work that the community is doing. This is not me, this is a community effort. To connect, to reach out, to break stigma, to be together and to live good lives. Come join us.

**Yael Trusch:** Shira Lankin Sheps, so proud of you! So awesome. Everybody, the Layers Project magazine. Check, go to Layers Project magazine and subscribe and get \$5 off your monthly subscription with the code JLP at checkout. Shira, thank you.

**Shira Sheps:** Thank you so much, Yael!

*[Theme Music]*

**Yael Trusch:** Thanks again to Shira Lankin Sheps for stopping by. Again the website is [www.thelayersprojectmagazine.com](http://www.thelayersprojectmagazine.com). Get your monthly subscription to the Layers Project magazine at a discounted rate from \$7.99 a month to \$5 a month using the code, JLP at checkout. Shira is on Facebook and Instagram, @thelayersproject and she is on Twitter @thelayersmag.

Fiftieth episode everyone! I cannot believe it. It has been such a fun ride. Thank you for being here with me. Be in touch to suggest a uniquely talented Jewish woman that you would like to see featured on the show and I am open for speaking engagements in the fall and winter of 2018, so

if you are planning an event for your community or for an organization you are involved with, well, let me know and I would love to visit. You can go to [www.jewishlatinprincess.com](http://www.jewishlatinprincess.com) and click on the about page and check out some of my signature talks or send me an email at [yael@jewishlatinprincess.com](mailto:yael@jewishlatinprincess.com). Have a great week.

***[Theme Music]***

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**End of Transcript**