

## Hadassah Presents: Women of Vision

### Season 1, Episode 6: Jane Eisner: Breaking the Glass Ceiling in Journalism

#### Zev Brenner:

Thank you for tuning in to TalkLine with Zev Brenner, the TalkLine Network in conjunction with Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America, is pleased to bring you a new radio series, Hadassah Presents: Women of Vision, a series of interviews conducted by Hadassah's CEO Janice Weinman, which highlights women whose visionary leadership and innovative approaches to the challenges in their respective fields have resulted in noteworthy successes for their organizations. And now your host, Janice Weinman.

#### Dr. Janice Weinman:

Jane Eisner is an accomplished journalist, educator, nonprofit leader and public speaker, who is currently Director of Academic Affairs at the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University overseeing the Masters of Arts program. For more than a decade, Jane was editor-in-chief of *The Forward*, the first woman to hold the position.

Under her leadership, the publication dramatically expanded its digital reach, becoming the authoritative source of news, opinion and culture in the Jewish world. *The Forward* won numerous regional and national awards and Jane's editorials were repeatedly honored by the Society of Professional Journalists and other media groups.

She is known for interviews of such notable figures as President Barack Obama, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, I should say former prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, President Reuven Rivlin and many others.

Before joining *The Forward* in 2008, Jane held executive, editorial and news positions at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* for 25 years, including stints as editorial page editor, syndicated columnist, City Hall bureau chief and foreign correspondent.

Subsequently, she served as vice president for national programs and initiatives at Philadelphia's National Constitution Center. She has appeared on *CNN*, *MSNBC*, *NPR*, *WNYC* and other stations around the country and the world. She is a frequent contributor to *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Time* and other major news outlets.

Jane is the author of *Taking Back the Vote: Getting American Youth Involved in Our Democracy*, published in 2004 by Beacon Press. Jane was the first Koeppel Fellow in Journalism at Wesleyan University and the first woman to win its McConaughy Award for contributions to journalism and public life.

She was one of three women chosen by the inaugural Fellows of the Katharine Houghton Hepburn center at Bryn Mawr College and a Senior Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania's Robert A. Fox Leadership Program. She's also a member of the council on foreign relations.

Jane's contributions to the field, not only in Jewish journalism, but of journalism period, are far too many to count. I am thrilled to have such an esteemed and talented journalist, and somebody I can call my friend, Jane Eisner, here with us today. Jane, thank you so very much for being here.

**Jane Eisner:**

Oh, Janice, thank you for that amazing introduction, much appreciated.

**Dr. Janice Weinman:**

It's my pleasure, really and our honor to have you on. So, I have a few questions and we look forward to hearing your responses. First, some people become journalists because they believe in the important role journalism plays in a democracy. Others, because they see it as a way to change the world. Still others, because they have an insatiable curiosity. What were your reasons for choosing the profession?

**Jane Eisner:**

Oh, gosh. I would say all of the above and add two more things. I'm nosy. I like to know what's going on. I'm just interested in people and things. Secondly, I love to write. Writing generally comes easy to me. It's a great pleasure and it's something that I felt I have tried to hone throughout my career. But, there's no doubt that the civic component of journalism, the belief that, if words and information are shared with the public, that will create a better government. A better society. That is definitely something that propelled me, from a very early age.

**Dr. Janice Weinman:**

That's a wonderful answer, and so compelling. Thank you for that. You worked in many mainstream journalism outlets, such as *The Philadelphia Inquirer* for 25 years. Did you find working at *The Forward* a completely different experience?

**Jane Eisner:**

It wasn't a completely different experience. I had actually taken a break from journalism. I left *The Inquirer* and joined the National Constitution Center for several years. Really thought I was embarking on a new career in not-for-profit management, until I got the offer to run *The Forward*, which I could not resist. Even though it entailed turning my life upside down and moving to New York and whatnot.

The minute I walked into the newsroom, I was like, "Oh yeah, this is where I belong." So, in that sense, it very much reminded me of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and other newspapers that I had worked for in the past. There's something about a journalistic sensibility that comes through in a newsroom. It's this kind of mixture of skepticism and idealism and fierce intelligence that you find among journalists that, really, I'm attracted to.

That said, I think when you work for a Jewish organization, as a Jew, especially one as storied and as important as *The Forward*, there's an additional level of commitment there, because you're writing about your people. That's very profound.

**Dr. Janice Weinman:**

I must tell you, I share that with you, in the sense that, when I came to Hadassah, I felt the same. I had spent many years in my professional world, but I felt now, I was able to do it for the people who I identify with and really hope to make a difference for. So, I can understand your feeling that way.

I want to ask you something else that is also an important issue. That is that you were the first woman to hold the position of editor-in-chief at *The Forward*. Were you conscious of being a woman? Do you feel that, as a woman, you brought something special to the role? That the staff reacted to you in a particular way?

**Jane Eisner:**

Well, I was definitely conscious of being a woman, because being the first woman at *The Forward* was not my first time. I was the first woman to hold a great many positions before then, at *The Inquirer*. Certainly, the first mother. I was the second woman and first mother to be named a foreign correspondent when I lived and worked overseas. I was the first woman to be editorial page editor.

So, I was very conscious of the fact that I was there, at *The Inquirer*, of women who came before me and paved the way and that it was important for me to do what women in those positions must do. Which is perform better than ever, to really prove that we could do it and to bring along other women, as well.

I have to say that I never detected difficulties with my staff. Most of the staff are young at a place like *The Forward*. Frankly, the men are used to having strong women in their lives. Their partners, their mothers, their sisters. I did not sense a difficulty. In fact, for my first few years there, the managing editor was also a woman. We really had two women at the head of the newsroom.

I do think, however, that my perspective as a woman definitely changed the kind of journalism that we did. I think there were stories that just did not occur to men. There were projects that we did, that had to do with women's equality, equity and fairness. Like the salary survey that we did every year, that I think was really important. I was also very conscious of including women's voices in our stories.

I will never forget editing a very long story, by someone, I won't name the person. Fine, fine journalist, but a man. The story did not include a quote from a single woman. I knew that there were really, really, really smart and opinionated women who would have something to contribute to that story.

I said to the journalist, "Please don't do this again. Next time you've ended a story like this. I'm not asking for a quota here, I'm just asking for accuracy. By accuracy, I mean including all the voices in our community. Not just some of them." Yes, I'd like to believe that I did make a difference as the first woman.

**Dr. Janice Weinman:**

The issue of women in journalism certainly has been something that's been discussed. I'd like to ask you a related question. Time Life was notorious for the sexism in its editorial ranks. Did you experience sexism as a young person starting out in the industry, or even as you progressed? You seem to indicate that you have not, but I wondered, how did you deal with it, if you ever did experience it? Were there any support groups for women, formal or informal?

**Jane Eisner:**

Wow, that's so interesting Janice, because I'm old enough to have spanned a real sea-change. In my very first job out of journalism school, I went to Columbia as well, I was working for *The Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*. I had an editor who, frankly, really harassed me. I didn't have that language at the time, I was very young. This person had a great deal of power over me. I wasn't assaulted, but I was physically harassed. It was something that I never shared with anyone, anyone.

I'll never forget, a few years after this, I was happily preparing to get married. My mother said to me, "Oh, how about that nice editor who helped you out so much when you first got to Norfolk? Why don't you invite him to the wedding?" I remember snapping at her, which I would never have ordinarily done. I said, "Oh, no. No, no, no." I had just a visceral fear and loathing of that whole experience, for a really long time.

I remember confessing it to one friend, the night of the Anita Hill testimony. Anita Hill, if you recall, testifying that Justice Clarence Thomas had harassed her at work. And never saying it again. Until the Me Too movement exploded a couple of years ago, I never even told my husband, and we are as close as can be. So, yes, I did have that experience and others not quite as dramatic, but still something that has scarred me for life.

I have great sympathy for other women who are going through this, and a certain degree of shame, that I did not bring it up at the time. Because who knows how many other people this person harassed in the way he did me? Yeah, so that is definitely part of my experience. That said, I have also seen a tremendous evolution of support.

By the time I got to *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, there was a woman's support group, that was meeting with the editor and talking about how women needed to have more opportunities. Out of that support group, the editor then turned and offered me the opportunity to be a foreign correspondent. Again, only the second woman and the first mother. Nobody could believe it. Nobody could believe, I had a year-old child, that I would go overseas, but we made it work.

We did it, it was amazing. My husband was able to join eventually. We had an extraordinary experience and I'd like to believe I paved the way for other women and other mothers to be able to do that. I credit that editor, Gene Roberts, a legendary editor, for giving me the opportunity to do that.

It was up to me to decide yes or no, but he gave me the opportunity to do that. I really credit the women's support group for creating that space that encouraged him to do that. I definitely believe that we need to support each other, up and down the line.

**Dr. Janice Weinman:**

Speaking of paving the way, Jane, where is journalism today, in terms of equal opportunity for women? Have women finally shattered the glass ceiling in this industry?

**Jane Eisner:**

Yes, but. Yes, in that there are more women in positions of importance. There's been a woman who was the executive editor of *The New York Times*. *The Washington Post* just named its first woman editor-in-chief, Sally Buzbee. No one, no one questions her credentials. She is enormously well qualified in every level.

Our classes at the journalism school, we have more women than men in general. So, I think the pipeline is very, very strong. That said, there's still inequality in pay and promotions. My understanding is that, when the White House met with the top editors of news organizations regarding this sort of question, about whether or not journalists' records had been subpoenaed under the Trump administration, that Sally Buzbee from *The Washington Post* was, in fact, the only woman in the room.

So, there still are times. When Katharine Graham took over as publisher of *The Washington Post*, there's this famous photograph, of her and all the top editors of news organizations all around the country. It's Katharine Graham and like, a zillion guys. White guys. Something like that wouldn't happen today, but I'm quite certain that there wouldn't be equality either. So, we have a ways to go.

**Dr. Janice Weinman:**

I'd like to ask you, pivoting to something a little bit different, about journalism today. Not just in terms of gender, but in terms of the whole industry and how it has changed over the last 20 years. There have been huge consolidations, with ownership shifting from long-time owners and private families, to business people, hedge funds and other corporate entities. With the primary objective, really, to make money.

In response to shrinking in advertising budgets, tens of thousands of reporters and editors have been laid off and bought out. News bureaus around the world have been shut down and hundreds of local and specialty outlets, including Jewish outlets, have closed all over the country. What effect have these seismic changes had, both on the field of journalism and, very importantly, on our democracy?

**Jane Eisner:**

Well, I think that last phrase that you said, Janice, is so important. Yes, I am concerned about the shrinking newsrooms, the shrinking opportunities. I could go on and on about how concerned we are about that. But, what I hope your listeners, the women of Hadassah and

other people will understand, is that this isn't just about whether graduates of Columbia Journalism School can get jobs when they graduate. This is really, really about the underpinning of our democracy.

There's a reason we have the First Amendment and protections for press, for media in there. It's because the free flow of information, the right that we have, on behalf of citizens, to hold our government and other leaders accountable, is essential for the functioning of a democracy. It really, really is something that should concern us all.

Everyone who listens to this pays for subscriptions. Pays for subscriptions. For local media, for national media, for Jewish media. If you care to do that as well, it's essential that we support that. The biggest shrinkage has not been necessarily in the number of people covering the White House. We will probably always have that. *New York Times* and *Washington Post* and some of the other really big organizations will still be around.

The big concern that we all have is in local news. It's where I got my start, covering small towns in Connecticut, covering school board meetings and zoning commission meetings, and even high school football teams in these communities. That's the lifeblood of our democracy. We need to know what's going on in those communities.

There has been documented evidence that when local news organizations close, public corruption increases, because no one is watching our tax dollars at work. So, it is essential that we revitalize local news. There's some amazing not-for-profits that are doing that, Report for America. A number of other organizations that, now, are trying to bolster local news. We've had a growth of not-for-profits that have done an extraordinary work. You think of people like ProPublica and other organizations like that.

Still, though, it is a struggle. I know when I was at *The Forward*, we were constantly having to scramble, to try to increase the amount of money that we earned from our readers, donors and, to some degree, advertisers.

**Dr. Janice Weinman:**

It is so heartening, what you say, because the diversity of our population and the contributions that people make throughout the United States are no longer captured with the absence of having local reporting and local imaging and everything. Because it takes away from the real sense of a conglomerate, of different people and different backgrounds in this country. It's such a shame. I wonder how journalism schools, including Columbia's, have changed in response to these tremendous changes in the industry.

**Jane Eisner:**

Oh, gosh. So many ways. For one thing is, I think particularly in the past couple of years, with the awakening of consciousness about race and diversity and inclusion at the Journalism School, we have made a number of changes. We are doing much more teaching and conversations about how to broaden and include many, many different voices. Many different kinds of stories. That, I think, is really important.



We also recognize that it's our job to help train our students to work in the newsrooms of the future. So, there's greater emphasis on developing audio skills and video skills and other skills like that. Particularly in the last couple of years, because of what's happened during the pandemic, we are offering new opportunities for our graduates.

We've created fellowships in not-for-profit newsrooms all across the country, large and small. I, just this week, am working with the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. We're creating a grant program for our students to be able to continue to do important work on that. I think, both in terms of what we teach and how we teach. But, also the opportunities that we're trying to grow for our students, we really have to take into account the changes in journalism as a whole. And be a part of that, happily.

**Dr. Janice Weinman:**

I'd like to ask you two related questions. One has to do with when journalists want, in fact, to manage other journalists, in the situation that you have. Do you think that different skills are needed, then, to lead a newsroom than to lead in other kinds of organizations? The second question I have for you is, what advice do you give young people who wish to become journalists today?

**Jane Eisner:**

On the first question, again, it's sort of, yes, but. There are ways of being a good manager, particularly in modern times right now. That I think span all sorts of organizations. I think gone are the days when there's strict hierarchy. When orders were just barked out and people saluted and did what they were told.

There's an additional challenge in newsrooms, because you are talking about very creative and frankly, sometimes quirky people, who have their own ideas about how stories should be and what stories should be told when and how. There's a great deal of pressure to meet deadlines. So, when I hired people at *The Forward*, I paid a lot of attention to personality.

I wanted people who would play well in the sandbox, if you will. I didn't want any divas in the newsroom. It was a small group of people. We couldn't afford to have some prima donnas. I really wanted people who were going to pitch in.

One of the phrases that most irritated me is when somebody said, "Well, that's not my job." I was like, "Really?" Because when we had a print edition and we were putting out the print newspaper or print magazine, it was everybody's job to do it. I was editor-in-chief, I wrote photo captions. That's what you do. I think that sort of sense of collaborative spirit is very important in all organizations, but especially in newsrooms.

**Dr. Janice Weinman:**

Is that what you would tell younger people when they enter the industry?

**Jane Eisner:**

Oh, absolutely. I mean, I would tell them a number of things. First, write. Write and report and do it everywhere. I'm a big believer in college journalism. I was also the first woman to be editor of my college newspaper, back in the day. I think it is a fantastic place to learn, to make mistakes. Now, journalism is multimedia. I never thought I'd be on TV. I never thought I'd be doing radio as a journalist. Those of us in print said, "Oh, yes. We have good faces for print."

Those distinctions aren't there any more now. I think it's important to learn as many skills as you can. Because we call upon journalists now, to do radio and podcasting. To do television, to write for digital spaces. In some cases, still for print. It's important to do that as well, as a young journalist. Prepare yourself for the future.

**Dr. Janice Weinman:**

It's really been so enlightening to hear what you have to say, Jane, it really has. You mentioned digital platforms, and I wonder if those digital platforms have reduced the integrity of journalism, as we proceed in more and more social media?

**Jane Eisner:**

Well, there's-

**Dr. Janice Weinman:**

Yes?

**Jane Eisner:**

There's no doubt that the gate-keeping role that journalists played when you and I were children, whether it was the decisions made to put a story on the front page of *The New York Times* or to lead the evening news. Those gate-keeping functions have disappeared now. Anyone can post anything, anywhere.

I think there are benefits to that, that that gate-keeping role isn't controlled just by a narrow segment of our society. Let's be honest, when you and I were coming up, it was white men who were mostly controlling what was news. At the same time, there's no doubt that, for many people, there's little distinction made between news and opinion, and in fact, fact and falsehood. That is very troubling.

I do want to say that the digital space isn't all negative, either. After all, we're talking and other people are going to hear us. When I worked for *The Forward*, initially, to read *The Forward*, you had to read Yiddish. Then, you had to read English in print, but then, you can read it digitally. Anyone could, and it gives you the opportunity to speak to a bigger audience. As with so many things in life these days, there are challenges and there are blessings.

**Dr. Janice Weinman:**

With those challenges and blessings, we are going to close. As far as this opportunity to speak with you, it has really been opportunities. We have learned so much from you, in a field that is evolving so extensively. I can't think of a person who would be better than you, Jane, to give us



a glimpse into the world and to share with us all the experiences that you have brought to the field of journalism and to Jewish journalism. Thank you so very much.

**Jane Eisner:**

Well, it's really been my pleasure and my honor, Janice, to speak with you.

**Zev Brenner:**

You've been listening to a new series airing on TalkLine with Zev Brenner, Hadassah Presents: Women of Vision, with Hadassah CEO Janice Weinman. The program is a production of TalkLine Network and Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America. Thanks for listening.