

Beckoned By My Namesake

By **Dr. Amy Neustein** - 20 Heshvan 5785 - November 20, 2024

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What the Heritage Foundation's 'Project Esther' Means to Me?

My parents named me “Esther” in Hebrew after my mother’s beloved aunt who was an avid reader and a woman of very fine moral character. In English they named me “Amy.” The simple explanation they offered was that since “Esther” spelled in Hebrew begins with an aleph, they chose an English name that similarly began with the first letter of the alphabet. But that simple reasoning was soon eclipsed by my parents’ revelation that when they named me “Amy” they distinctively had in mind an alternate spelling: “*Ami*.” Certainly, this was not intended for the French (male) word “friend.”

“*Ami*,” which translates to “my people,” imbued me from an early age with a passionate commitment to *Am Yisrael*. My Hebrew name, Esther, likewise instilled in me a very strong desire to protect my fellow Jews from any harm that may come their way. Earlier this month, when I read of the pogrom in Amsterdam, followed by attacks on Jews in France who had come out to support the Maccabees in the international soccer match, I felt the earth convulsing. It was plainly obvious that the hatred deep in the collective consciousness of Israel’s adversaries is now the propelling force behind a present-day Jew-hunt in Europe. Jews, undeservedly blamed, beaten and bludgeoned for Israel’s actions to protect itself from an existential threat to its survival, are now facing dangers not seen since the Holocaust.

“Project Esther,” defined by the Heritage Foundation as “a national strategy to combat antisemitism,” has gathered religious groups across the theological spectrum. Forming the National Task Force to Combat Antisemitism, Project Esther has gained the support of the Coalition for Jewish Values (CJV) – the largest rabbinic public-policy organization in America dedicated to restoring America’s moral foundation – in responding to the needs of the Jewish community. Representing 2,500 traditional rabbinic leaders in public policy, CJV has garnered the respect of lawmakers on Capitol Hill. With the recent trifecta – a Republican victory in the presidential race, the Senate, and, more recently, the House – Project Esther will certainly get a boost, considering the unflagging support that Republicans have given to Israel and to Jews in the U.S.

Since the political climate is now propitious toward Jewish interests, we need to be proactive. Project Esther, conceived by the Heritage Foundation as “a blueprint to counter antisemitism” in the United State, is very encouraging. One of its main foci is to work assiduously and sedulously to dismantle the Hamas support network and to invigorate the silent majority to “recover its voice and convert its words into actions to render impotent an illegitimate, hateful minority that threatens America’s soul.” Their goal is to galvanize support across various sectors of the population so that these groups can help “protect not only American Jewry, but the sanctity of the core values...that ensure the security and prosperity of all Americans.”

In essence, at the heart of Project Esther is a deep commitment to *tikkun olam*. In denuding hateful groups of their animus, while simultaneously extirpating the foundation of hateful thinking, Americans would finally be rid of these dreadful forces. Polluted and prejudiced thinking have no place in a healthy society. Addressing antisemitism at its core, and carefully taking pragmatic steps to eradicate the forces that propagate Jew hatred, are indeed salutary measures that benefit *all* Americans and not just the Jewish community.

As a sociologist, I recognize the importance of Project Esther’s work. Their galvanizing the support of many theological groups – to work side-by-side with Jewish leaders and activists in eradicating Jew-hatred that has surged exponentially since October 7, 2023 – is surely a judicious approach. Project Esther’s methodical plan and their establishment of a reasonable timetable to meet their goals is certainly encouraging. My recognition of the significance of Heritage’s efforts is on a cognitive level. But as a Jewish woman – summoned by my Esther/*Ami* namesake – I am drawn to Project Esther on a level that runs so deep that I’m truly humbled.

When I think of *Am Yisrael* hurting – subject to upbraiding, taunting and terror – I feel like a foot soldier serving at the directive of my commanding officer. I am roused to fight for my fellow Jews, whether in Israel, the U.S., or anywhere in the Diaspora. My namesake propels me, defines me, and shapes my trajectory. I will not stand silent while Jew-hunts of the past have reemerged in the present.

When I think back, I remember how I made a commitment many years ago to my fellow Jews that “Never Again” for me specifically means “*Forever Never Again!*” My dedication to preventing atrocities in the Jewish community is not something I take up haphazardly every now and then. Instead, it is an everlasting and ever-present commitment to fighting the scourge of antisemitism. In this way, “Never Again” becomes eternal.

I will do my best to galvanize support for Heritage’s Project Esther which I believe in with all my heart and soul. When my namesake beckons, I answer. I stand proud in my commitment to *Am Yisrael*.

Dr. Amy Neustein