

“Project Esther”: Exploiting Jewish Fear to Advance Dangerous Policy

A resource by The Nexus Project and T’ruah, March 2025

What is Project Esther?

Project Esther is a report published by the far-right Heritage Foundation in the fall of 2024. It offers a playbook for far-right elected officials to use fighting antisemitism as a smokescreen for promoting dangerous antidemocratic policies.

The report, which was created without input from representative Jewish community thinkers, claims to provide clear answers about who is to blame for rising antisemitism and what should be done about it. But instead of focusing on actual threats, Project Esther exploits Jews’ legitimate fears of rising antisemitism to advocate for curtailing free speech and targeting other marginalized groups. The report:

- **Lumps together a wide-range of civil society organizations, claiming they are “terrorist supporters”** by making the spurious and deliberately frightening case that there is a “*highly organized, global Hamas Support Network*” of civil society non-profits.
- **Demonizes diversity, equity, and inclusion** by suggesting that these initiatives are antisemitic and anti-Israel and are not only a threat to Jews but to all Americans because they “*[attempt] to lay siege to our education system, political processes, and government.*”
- **Dismisses the comprehensive Biden White House National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism** that was crafted in consultation with over a thousand Jewish community leaders and practitioners, saying it “*appears to have more to do with furthering the progressive left’s obsession with LGBTQ+ and all other minorities than it has to do with anything substantive in countering antisemitism.*”
- **Downplays and dismisses right-wing antisemitism** by claiming that “*no other antisemitic organization or movement threatens American Jewry and Western civilization more than the [Hamas Support Network].*”
- **Offers a step-by-step plan for defunding, undermining, and dismantling organizations it deems antisemitic**, which undermines the First Amendment by curtailing free speech.

How is it being used?

President Trump and members of Congress are already translating Project Esther's blueprint into government action.

- At the end of January 2025, Trump issued an **executive order that mandates universities to monitor and report on the political activities of international students**, effectively

attempting to transform educational institutions into extensions of immigration enforcement. [The White House talking points](#) reveal more explicit intentions: cracking down on immigration, free expression, and civil society organizations. The talking points quote Trump saying, *“To all the resident aliens who joined in the pro-jihadist protests, we put you on notice: come 2025, we will find you, and we will deport you.”*

- In late 2024, a bill was introduced in Congress that purported to be aimed at organizations that fund terror. **The Stop Terror-Financing and Tax Penalties on American Hostages Act (H.R. 9495 in the 118th Congress)** would grant the Secretary of the Treasury sweeping discretion to designate U.S. nonprofits as "terrorist supporting organizations" and strip them of tax-exempt status, even without evidence of intentional support for terrorism or connection to actual violence. To many nonprofits, this would be a death sentence. H.R. 9495 is a perfect example of Project Esther's strategy: taking a legitimate concern and using it to target civil society.

Why should Jews care?

By focusing attention on protesters, Project Esther deliberately obscures the greatest current threat to Jewish communities: the Trump administration's platforming of antisemites and white Christian nationalists. At a frightening moment in Jewish history, when there is rising antisemitism across the political spectrum, we desperately need better, stronger relationships with other marginalized groups. The people behind this strategy seek to pit Jews against our natural allies by suggesting we are natural enemies.

At the same time, Project Esther is a blueprint for targeting any organization with a systemic approach to social justice or civil rights work. While Project Esther and corresponding policies begin by targeting pro-Palestinian activism, they establish dangerous precedents for using civil rights law and government surveillance to suppress political speech. Limiting these freedoms is one more step toward authoritarianism.

What can I do?

- **Keep Project Esther in mind** when evaluating new antisemitism legislation and initiatives. Ask yourself: Who are these programs designed to protect? Who might they harm? What kinds of antisemitism are going unchecked?
- **Share what you've learned** about Project Esther with your community. Point out when you see elements of Project Esther showing up.
- **Learn more about antisemitism** by reading T'ruah's [A Very Brief Guide to Antisemitism](#). Explore The Nexus Project's [resources](#) for more about the intersection of antisemitism with Israel and Zionism.
- **Read more below about the biblical heroine Esther** and get inspired to resist rising authoritarianism.

Who is Esther? How can her story inspire us to oppose “Project Esther”?

The story of Esther, primarily found in the Book of Esther, or Megillat Esther, offers rich material that can be interpreted as a narrative about resistance to fighting authoritarianism. Esther’s story can be seen as one of bravery, advocacy for justice, and standing up against oppressive rulers and using empathy and education to change policy.

Below are some Jewish texts to help us explore how this biblical heroine can provide inspiration to fight against this dangerous legislation.

Esther 4:14

On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis.”

This famous line, said by Esther’s cousin Mordecai, implores Esther to act. It teaches that fighting against authoritarianism isn’t just a personal obligation, but a higher responsibility.

Esther Rabbah 8:6

“For if you are silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, and you and your father’s house will perish; who knows if it was for a time like this that you attained royalty?” (Esther 4:14). “For if you are silent” – if you [Esther] are silent now and refrain from advocating on behalf of your nation, ultimately you will be silent in the future and you will have no claim. Why? Because you have the opportunity to perform good during your life and you [will have] failed to do so. What, do you think that the Holy One blessed be He will abandon Israel? In any case, he will provide them with a redeemer; that is what is written: “Relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place.”

This Midrash explains that Esther's choice to reveal her Jewish identity to the king was a radical act of defiance against a system that aimed to destroy her people. We are in a moment when we have a chance to stand up against real threats to the Jewish people. May her courage serve as a model to our communities