

Rabbi Hirsch: Who knows, maybe it is Just For This moment that you find yourself in a position of leadership. I'm Rabbi Liz Hirsch, and I'm your host. Inspired by the story of Esther, I will invite women in leadership to talk about women and leadership. As the executive director of Women of Reform Judaism, the women's affiliate of the largest Jewish denomination in North America, I am committed to sharing powerful stories of women who stand out in their fields, who have stepped up Just For This moment. Each week, I interview women who are influencing the world around them. This week, my guest is Amy Spitalnick.

In any great story, there is no hero without a villain. A protagonist needs her antagonist to drive the tension and magnify the courage of the decision to act boldly. The Purim story is no exception. Esther is our hero, and her villain is Haman. Boo. At public readings of the Scroll of Esther, we blot out Haman's name with boos, noisemakers, and shouts. So complete was Haman's disgust toward the Jews of Persia that we automatically associate him with evil and hate. From generation to generation, we blot out his name.

In the face of hatred and evil, our protagonist, Esther, does not sit on the sidelines. She acts bravely to save her people, revealing her Jewish identity to her husband, the king, at great risk to her own personal safety.

Our guest today is no stranger to standing up to hatred. Amy Spitalnick was one of the lawyers on the groundbreaking suit against the neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and hate groups responsible for the violent Unite The Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Amy leads from a place of professional experience and personal responsibility. We spoke about her Jewish identity and family history and how it shows up for her in her work. Both of us began new roles leading legacy Jewish organizations this year, and we began our conversation talking about these Jewish organizations, and what it means to take these seats at the table in this moment as women of a new generation of leaders.

Amy: We are at a critical moment, not just for the Jewish community but for our democracy and for so many other communities. And there is such an opportunity right now to better tell the story of how Jewish safety is inextricably connected with our democracy, with other communities, safety, and develop and build the sorts of relationships need across communities that are inherent to our shared future. We need to understand the urgency of this moment and really think about how our institutions, how our organizations can meet it in new and innovative ways.

And so the opportunity to come into an 80-year-old organization like JCPA to work with the Jewish Community Relations Council Networks. We have 125 JCRCs around the country who are on the front lines of this bridge-building work across United States. And to rebuild and build partnerships both with Jewish and non-Jewish partners and allies is not just important because, in and of itself, we know it matters. But it really is existential to our community safety and to so many others' community safety at this key moment for our country.

Rabbi Hirsch: Yeah, I think for me, it's a combination of simple things like being more active on social media, knowing that you're going to be able to connect with people who are in those spaces who might not be consuming content or just have the natural affinity to get involved with our organizations in other ways. And also, I do think there's a significant opponent of see it to be it, right. That you can see that we're not just relegating Jewish leadership to... either to male-identified leaders to people of a certain generation, but to say, "Oh, I see myself potentially reflected in those leaders, and I might want to get engaged with that too."

Amy: I think that's exactly right. Look, it's no secret that communal Jewish leadership in this country has looked a certain way for a long time, and we are now starting to see more and more younger women, Jews of color, and others who really reflect the diversity of our community stepping into leadership roles, whether they're organizational leadership roles, pulpits, or other places. And that matters because the diversity of the Jewish community, the pluralism of the Jewish community is our greatest strength.

And so as we think about... I think about bringing JCPA into this new chapter, as you think about bringing your work and your organization into this new chapter, I think both our own lived experiences as young women leaders of the Jewish community add so much richness and value to the work in terms of bringing people into why this matters. And it also, I think, opens the door to the sorts of partnerships and engagement, whether it be through more innovative communications, whether it be through building bridges with people and places that we might not have typically thought to work with, whether it is figuring out how we stay at the table even in challenging moments.

For me, that's just inherent in our generation and how we were raised. And that might differ from some of the approaches of the past in legacy Jewish organizations. But I think we have no choice at this moment to figure out how we build these bridges across lines of difference, how we stay at the table, how we have these hard conversations, while also, of course, calling people out and in as needed at a moment when we know our own safety as Jews is so tenuous.

Rabbi Hirsch: I love what you said about staying at the table in challenging moments and also knowing when are the times we call people out when we call them in, right. So our podcast is based on a verse from the Book of Esther where her Uncle Mordecai comes to Esther, who's become the queen, and she's been hiding her Jewish identity, and it's this peak moment and the drama.

And he says to her, "All of the Jews are at risk. You are in this seat, in this position. It's time for you to take a stand and to speak up." And he says to her, "Who knows, maybe Just For This moment, you're in this position of leadership." So I'm thinking, is there a moment that comes to mind for you either where you experienced that, like, "I'm in this seat for this reason," or

where you stayed at the table, something inspiring you from that quote, from that connection?

Amy:

That resonates with me so much just because I feel so fortunate to have been in positions over the last decade or so where I contribute my small piece to an issue that felt much larger than me. Going back nearly a decade ago, in 2016, in October 2016, I started in the New York Attorney General's Office.

I don't think any of us anticipated what would've happened or what did happen in November 2016 with the election of Donald Trump and the ways in which state AGs and I would argue New York, in particular, really became the first line of defense for so many people's fundamental rights and values, from fighting the Muslim ban, fighting the rollback of DACA, fighting environmental rollbacks, fighting rising hate crimes, and so many other horrific policies and developments that were coming out of Washington that were having very real dire local impacts across the country.

And so, being fortunate enough to be in that office leading communications and policy at such a crucial moment in the fight for civil and human rights, for people's fundamental dignity in this country, I really feel lucky. Of course, it's a fantastic team in that office as well, working not just with incredible public servants in New York but across the country, many of whom have gone on to higher office and played critical roles right now, even as we grapple with a slightly different variation of the challenges and threats that we're facing. Being in that role at that time really felt like right place, right time in a way that I never could have imagined.

I even remember being at the election night party for the Hillary campaign at the Javits Center, standing there with the then Attorney General, and when it became clear that the election was not going the way that many people in the room hoped, a friend of mine turned and said, "It's now on your office to protect people." And I don't think I had fully understood just how critical the office would be until we were really thrust into that end-of-2016 vacuum when everyone was scrambling to figure out what this would mean.

It was also through that role that I met some of the fantastic attorneys who I ultimately worked with in my next role, leading the organization where we brought the Charlottesville lawsuit, meeting Robbie Kaplan and Karen Dunn, who were the two lead counsels on our Charlottesville case, two fantastic, powerful, tireless women and coming together with them to move that effort forward. I ran an organization called Integrity First for America, which is the nonprofit that spearheaded the suit, working closely with Robbie and Karen and the legal team.

When we brought that case, we knew that there was a crisis of hate and extremism. But there was no way to know just how much of a preview Charlottesville really was when it came to the broader cycle of violence that

followed from, of course, Pittsburgh and Poway, El Paso, Buffalo, and so many other attacks on communities across this country, the ways in which the conspiracy theories and hate we saw in Charlottesville have become increasingly normalized in our society. And when we brought that suit, there was just no way to even anticipate how much of a harbinger that violence would be. And so I felt very fortunate to be in that role at that time with an incredible women-led team.

Rabbi Hirsch: And what about now, in this moment, as you take your relatively new seat heading up JCPA?

Amy: I started my role at JCPA full-time on September 5th, 2023, just a month before October 7th. And so I knew going into this role that the fight for Jewish safety, the fight for the sorts of inclusive societies in which everyone is safe and free, were obviously critical. October 7th put such a fine point on how tenuous Jewish safety is and how events that happen across the world, not only of course, are devastating to us as Jews here in the United States in terms of the pain and the grief we're all still feeling from that horrific massacre.

But also has had very real ripple effects in our communities here at home in terms of rising antisemitism and, of course, threats against other communities as well. And so being in this role at JCPA feels like exactly where I should be in this moment because there is such an opportunity to actually do something to advance the sorts of community relationships and bridge-building to help tell the story of why Jewish safety is so inherent to our democracy and other communities safety.

Rabbi Hirsch: I want to go back to the Charlottesville case, and sometimes, for many people, if you say Charlottesville, that means something very specific, very distinct to them within the Jewish community and within the broader community, unite the right if you say those words. For those less familiar with the case, could you just tell us a little bit more about what happened and then the work that you did on it?

Amy: Many of us remember sort of the brief images from Charlottesville. The neo-Nazis carrying tiki torches, chanting, "Jews will not replace us." The horrific car attack that killed Heather Heyer and injured so many others. It was six and a half years ago at this point, and a number of the details of that violent weekend might be a little fuzzy, particularly given how much has happened since. What's particularly important to understand is that the violence in Charlottesville this... that weekend when neo-Nazis, white supremacists from around the country descended on the University of Virginia, descended on downtown Charlottesville under the guise of protesting the removal of Confederate statues it was actually not an accident at all, and rather the manifestation of meticulous months and months of planning largely on social media where these extremists discussed everything from the mundane details and logistics to whether they

could hit protesters with cars and claim self-defense, which is of course precisely what happened.

And so that's not an accident, that's not a clash between two opposing sides of a protest. That's a racist, violent conspiracy rooted in antisemitism, rooted in anti-Black racism, rooted in xenophobia, and anti-immigrant hate. And so many of the conspiracy theories and hate that underpin that weekend to this idea of, "Jews will not replace us," speak to the increasingly normalized hate and bigotry we've seen in our society and our politics, the great replacement theory, which is the conspiracy theory that Jews are orchestrating the replacement of the white race through support for Black and Brown communities and others, which, of course, has fueled not just the Charlottesville violence but the Pittsburgh massacre, Poway, El Paso, Buffalo, and so many other attacks. The ways in which we've seen these extremists use what they're calling protests but are so often intended to be violent.

And we've seen this trend increase around the country over the last six and a half years since Charlottesville. What happened that weekend was no accident. There needed to be accountability for it. On behalf of nine plaintiffs who were injured in the violence, some who were students surrounded in attack during the torch march at the University of Virginia campus, others who were directly hit by the car and injured in that attack, including Marcus and Rissa, who were there with their friend, Heather Heyer, and a number of others. We brought a lawsuit against the two dozen neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and hate groups most directly responsible for orchestrating the violence, some of the leading names in the white supremacist movement at the time, Richard Spencer, Andrew Anglin, who runs the Daily Stormer, Chris Cantwell, National Socialist Movement, and a number of others. I was a long road to trial. Neo-Nazis do not like being sued and do not really believe in the rule of law.

Plus, we had the COVID pandemic layered on top of that, but it finally went to trial in October of 2021, and just before Thanksgiving that year, the jury came back with a massive multimillion-dollar verdict, finding every defendant liable for a violent conspiracy targeting people as part of that horrific weekend. There's actually now a documentary on HBO Max called No Accident that just came out this past fall that really shows the behind-the-scenes story of the trial. You get to meet our plaintiffs and some members of our legal team. I'm proud to be a part of it. What's so important about that is not simply the fact that there needs to be accountability in moments of extremism and hate. Of course, there needs to be. And especially at a time when we've seen such little accountability for hate and extremism that mattered. But it also helped pull back the curtain on how these extremists operate.

We had, for example, expert witness Deborah Lipstadt testify at trial who spoke specifically to the antisemitic conspiracy theories that were at the core of this violence and how antisemitism is used to animate and fuel broader white supremacy and extremism in this moment. We saw how the defendants, of

course, exploited social media to plan their violence, a theme that has been recurrent over the last many years. We've seen how they use this idea of, "I was simply joking. I didn't actually mean that we should hit protesters with cars," which again, when you look at acts of violence, when you look at things like January 6th is a recurrent theme, the case has really become a model for how we hold extremists accountable. We've seen similar lawsuits, civil lawsuits modeled on ours, brought against the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, Trump and Giuliani, and others responsible for January 6th.

And I'm proud to be a part of an effort through Human Rights First, where we brought a lawsuit against Patriot Front, a white supremacist hate group that has been responsible for a number of violent events around the country, but in this case, specifically attacked a Black musician in Boston a few summers ago on Independence Day weekend. And actually, most exciting to me as a former state AG employee. And we've seen now three state AGs bring lawsuits rooted in the same model in some cases related to January 6th, and also up in Massachusetts and New Hampshire against NSC-131, which is another neo-Nazi hate group that has been particularly focused in targeting migrants and immigrants in New England, but of course, is rooted deeply in the same sort of antisemitic white supremacist conspiracy theories that we saw in Charlottesville. And so seeing how the case has emerged as a model has been really heartening and a reminder that accountability is possible and crucial at a moment of rising hate and bigotry.

Rabbi Hirsch: How was your Jewish identity showing up for you when you were working on that case? Could you distinguish between Amy, the lawyer who's working on this case, and Amy, the Jewish individual who could have been a person involved in that? And you understand that when they're shouting, "Jews will not replace us," right, that that's about you as much as it's not about you at the same time?

Amy: It was really hard to separate the personal from the professional in that role. And I would argue it's probably true in this role as well, right. Most of us who work in these spaces are doing it not because it's easy or particularly lucrative or gives you tons of free time but because it's inextricably linked with your personal values and identity. And certainly, a few things were more true than the work in the Charlottesville case. I'm the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors. That has always been a core part of my identity and my understanding of who I am and the values I want to bring to my personal and professional lives.

But also, for a very long time, it was something that felt far off and more a piece of my family history than anything that was particularly relevant or perhaps a cautionary tale to the moment we were living in. And Charlottesville, in so many ways, ripped the band-aid off of that. It made clear that here in the United States, there was a very real movement of those who rooted in the same ideology that took the lives of so many of my family members that my

grandparents thankfully escaped. And, of course, millions of others were not as fortunate. That ideology has never gone away, and it was becoming particularly emboldened in the United States in 2017 and beyond.

And so as we saw that sort of extremism become increasingly normalized in our politics, in our society with very real-world consequences, of course, Charlottesville and then the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in US history in Pittsburgh and so many other acts of hate targeting so many other communities, it was very clear to me that my grandparents' story was no longer this far off piece of our own history so much as, again, a cautionary tale for the moment. And yeah, it was impossible to separate the two, impossible not to see the direct connections from 80 years ago manifesting in our contemporary moment.

I think if you had told me a decade ago, and certainly if you had told my grandparents when they were still around, that this would be what I spent my professional life doing, we probably would've thought you were crazy because they came to the United States as a place that their family would be safe and free from the hate that they escaped. And I remember growing up feeling so grateful to live in this moment in the United States where we didn't have to worry about anything like that.

And while we are not living in the 1930s in Germany or Poland, there are so many reasons to remain grateful that we are Jews living in this country in this year. We also need to be clear-eyed about the fact that we've seen this hate before. We know where it leads, and we have to do everything in our power to fight back against it. And so it really was impossible to separate the two. I imagine that's true for me now in this role as well. And for me, it helps give me strength in the work. And I'm not sure it makes it easier, but it also makes it even more meaningful and makes me feel even more fortunate to get to do it.

Rabbi Hirsch: Have you always been connected to your Jewish identity, or is that something that evolved for you over time?

Amy: I think I've always been connected to my Jewish identity, but what that's looked like has evolved in very real ways. I grew up in New York, going to synagogue every weekend, thinking about the Hershey chocolate bars we would get at the end of junior Shabbat or whatever it was called at the time. And we celebrated most holidays. We went to services on Shabbat, went to Hebrew school, had a bat mitzvah, did all of the things that were expected of a Jewish family in the 90s in New York.

It was really more in high school and especially college when I think I understood the ways in which my Jewish identity, while certainly still connected to those traditions and to the observance of holidays and those other pieces, was in some ways even more connected to my personal values, right, to social justice, to repairing the world, to my desire to work in government and politics

and advocacy and to be able to put those pieces together, particularly in college.

I went to Tufts, and I was very involved in the Hillel on campus. It's a school that's very focused on public service and social justice and other issues that really allowed me to understand how my Jewish identity was deeply connected to those values and then to put myself on a career path that allowed me to live them. That evolution, while I still, of course, belong to my synagogue, and we celebrate all of the holidays, and I am raising my daughter Jewish.

And all of that, of course, is so inherent to my identity, but so too are the ways in which these broader values and how they inform my work are inextricably part of my Jewishness and my Judaism as well. And so understanding that, I think, was a real shift for me and has allowed me to feel more Jewishly connected in ways that I perhaps never could have understood when I was younger.

Rabbi Hirsch: Thank you for sharing all that. Amazing just to think about the legacy and the changes for your family over just a few generations, right. To have grandparents who are Holocaust survivors and then you in the seat that you're in, and thinking about the Jewish life and the experiences that you're creating both in your home but also through your professional work for your daughter.

Amy: Yeah. It's been... There's been many moments over the last few years by nature of just the world we're living in and we're resurgent hate, as we've talked about, where I've sort of looked around and had that moment of how did we get from my grandparents and their generation to here, and both in a heartbreaking way in certain ways, the fact that we're still grappling with this in the year 2024, and then I'm part of a broader effort to fight the very same hate that they escaped, and also from a place of deep gratitude.

In particular, I remember sitting at the White House on October 11th when the president convened a group of Jewish leaders to talk about, of course, what happened on October 7th, but also the antisemitism strategy that the White House unveiled last year and how we can continue to move it forward in this moment. And he, of course, talked about his own personal connections to Holocaust history and how he brings his family to Dachau and has made it part of what he instills in his kids and grandkids.

And I remember sort of sitting there feeling in awe of the fact that just two generations after my grandparents escaped their Holocaust, their granddaughter can be sitting at the White House. And that, unlike their generation, we have people in leadership positions who are actually doing something about antisemitism, about other forms of hate, about protecting democracy, and that we have a seat at the table.



Rabbi Hirsch: One of the reasons why I was excited to talk with you and why Esther's story is so inspiring to me is that antisemitism is really tied up in the Purim story, right. It's the part of our sacred text, of our Bible, of our Tanakh, where we are living as a minority people. And yet here's Esther, who comes into this position of pretty much the highest echelon of power of a seat at the table that a woman could have, let alone that she's a Jewish woman and she has to hide her identity.

And that moment where she stops hiding and speaks up is prompted by Jewish hate, by Jews fearing for their safety and for their lives because of the plot that Haman has. And Haman is an archetype, but we can see him showing up in all of the work that you're involved in, a lot of what we're facing in the Jewish community today. So how does the model of Esther set up for you the work that you're doing, and what are seeing about the changes in antisemitism and our changes in awareness about it? How has it shifted over time if we think of it as kind of a long sweep from Esther to today?

Amy: Esther leaning into and embracing her Jewish identity publicly for the first time in this moment of dire antisemitism speaks so well to the moment we're in. Since October 7th, we've seen American Jews and Jews around the world, I think, embrace their Jewish identity in new ways. I always wore my grandmother's necklace, but I also added a Jewish star to what I'm wearing. And I know of countless other Jews who have done the same, who have just started to sort of more publicly and embrace their Jewish identity in ways that perhaps before October 7th, they didn't because it was such a clear threat to our safety, such a clear threat to our future. Embracing that identity feels like a really important way to push back.

And one of the conversations I'm having so frequently in communities around the country is how we not lose pride in our Judaism, how we remain strong, proud Jews, being smart and safe and taking precautions where needed, but also not allowing the state of the world, certainly post-October 7th, but also well before October 7th in terms of rising antisemitism, deter us from embracing our Jewish identities and Jewish values and not allowing us to live fully and proudly as Jews. And so that's something that I'm thinking a lot about, and that, of course, is inherently linked to building the sorts of inclusive societies in which not just we as Jews, but everyone, is safe.

Rabbi Hirsch: I'm your host, Rabbi Liz Hirsch, executive director of Women of Reform Judaism, and you've been listening to Just For This. Check us out on most social media platforms @justforthispodcast. You can also follow Women of Reform Judaism @wrj1913. Our show is produced by Sheir and Shim LLC. Special thanks to Lisa Pincus Hamroff, Aly Rubin, Rabbi Neil Hirsch, Lior, and Mikah. Jen King designed our logo, and Eric Shimelonis wrote our theme music. Thanks for listening. We'll have more Just For This moments next time.