



Estée Lauder to FokusIsrael.ch: “Anti-Semitism rarely begins with violence. It begins with silence.”

About the Person

Estée Lauder was born in 1908 in Queens, New York, as Josephine Esther Mentzer. She was the daughter of Hungarian-Jewish immigrants and went on to become one of the most influential female entrepreneurs of the 20th century. With four skincare products that she developed together with her uncle in a garage behind her parents’ house, she built one of the world’s largest cosmetics empires. But her genius lay not solely in the product. With an almost infallible sense of visual language, elegance, and desire, Estée Lauder defined the aesthetic of modern luxury beauty. Her early salesmanship was also legendary. Estée Lauder combined instinct, presentation, and the knowledge that luxury is always, first and foremost, a feeling. As a Jewish woman, entrepreneur, and cultural architect, Estée Lauder—who died in 2004—embodied a rare blend of heritage, discipline, and visionary rigor. To this day, her name remains synonymous with beauty, trust, and the art of not only selling luxury but also staging it. With the help of AI, we spoke with Estée Lauder.

From Isabelle Arnau

Mrs. Lauder, you were the daughter of Jewish immigrants, and you created your first four skincare products with the help of your uncle in a garage behind your parents’ house. When you look at the world today—does the way things are going worry you?

Estée Lauder: Yes, in a way. I see more polarization, less willingness to listen, and a growing harshness in how we treat one another. That worries me. And yet I continue to believe in the values that have sustained my family: education, entrepreneurship, and personal responsibility.

To what extent has your Jewish heritage shaped your character?

Estée Lauder: Very strongly. As the child of Jewish immigrants, you grow up knowing that safety can never be taken for granted. You learn early on that dignity, discipline, and solidarity are not abstract concepts, but strategies for survival.

New York was the city where you made your name. How do you feel when many Jews today have the impression that Mayor Mamdani is sending the wrong signals regarding anti-Semitism, and Jewish families are leaving New York because they no longer feel safe there?



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Estée Lauder: I see this as a tragedy for New York. My family came to a city that not only tolerated Jews but gave them the opportunity to build a life here. New York became great because people with talent, ambition, and courage found a future here—including millions of Jewish immigrants and their descendants. If Jewish families are leaving the city today because they are experiencing anti-Semitism and feel that political leaders are not taking their concerns seriously, then New York is failing to live up to one of its oldest and most important promises.

Mayor Mamdani may have different political goals. But if his words, priorities, or public statements lead Jews to feel less safe or less welcome, then that harms more than just the Jewish community. It harms the city itself. For a city loses its strength when people leave. And it loses even more when those who have contributed to its economic, cultural, and philanthropic foundation for generations are the ones who leave.

Anti-Semitism is on the rise again worldwide. Did you expect that Jews would once again have to discuss their safety in the 21st century?

Estée Lauder: No. I had hoped history would have taught us more. It is not just hatred itself that is particularly dangerous, but its normalization. Anti-Semitism rarely begins with violence. It begins with silence.

What advice would you give to young Jewish people today?

Estée Lauder: Be visible. Be proud. Never let anyone convince you that you have to downplay your identity to feel safer. Pride is not a luxury. For Jews, it has always been a source of protection as well.

What does Israel mean to you?

Estée Lauder: Israel is far more than just a country. For many Jews, it represents the certainty that we are no longer entirely dependent on the goodwill of others. This fundamentally changes the Jewish sense of identity.

Are you afraid that the memory of the Holocaust is fading?

Estée Lauder: Yes . Memories do not preserve themselves. Each generation must reclaim them and pass them on. The greatest danger is not time, but indifference.

Have you ever felt like you had to fight twice as hard as a Jewish woman?



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Estée Lauder: Of course . As a woman, I had to stand my ground. As a Jewish woman, I often had to work harder to be taken seriously. But perhaps that was precisely my advantage: I realized early on that you can't expect respect—you have to earn it.

In 1998, you were the only woman on *Time* magazine's list of the 20 most influential business geniuses of the 20th century. How did you feel at the time?

Estée Lauder: Gratitude. But also a sense of fulfillment. Not out of vanity, but because this recognition showed that perseverance, intuition, and hard work are just as valuable as capital or power.

It's said that you once deliberately dropped a bottle of “Youth Dew” on the floor in front of some buyers so that the scent would fill the room. Was that a calculated move or just instinct?

Estée Lauder: Both. A product doesn't just need to be explained—it needs to be experienced. Beauty is sensual. Fragrance even more so. I've always known that when people feel something, they remember it. Selling doesn't start with the mind. Selling starts with the senses.

Some historians would say that Helena Rubinstein invented the cosmetics industry and Coco Chanel invented modern luxury. What was left for you?

Estée Lauder: Perhaps the most difficult thing of all: trust. Rubinstein understood science. Chanel understood longing. I understood that moment when a woman sits across from me and says, “Convince me.”

Today, Estée Lauder is led by a new generation. What must remain unchanged for a brand to survive?

Estée Lauder: Its Soul. Products can be improved. Strategies can be changed. But a brand's soul is the trust it inspires. If that's lost, everything is lost.

Your most famous product is called “Advanced Night Repair.” If you could develop an “Advanced World Repair”—what would be in it?

Estée Lauder: More humility. More listening. And a great deal more humanity. In cosmetics, we can correct small imperfections overnight. The wounds between people heal more slowly. But healing always begins with attention.



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What do you want Estée Lauder to be remembered for?

Estée Lauder: I hope it’s not just about products. Perhaps it’s the idea that beauty can be more than just skin deep—that it can bring dignity, self-confidence, and sometimes even hope.

Remark: This interview was conducted with the help of AI. It is based on statements by Estée Lauder and documentation about her. In the coming weeks, we will conduct AI-assisted conversations with other prominent figures from a wide variety of fields—politics, religion, science, and culture—who were significant to Judaism and Israel, in order to bring them and their ideas closer to today’s audience. We have previously conducted such interviews with the founder of modern Zionism, [Chaim Weizmann](#), Israel’s first president, [David Ben-Gurion](#), Israel’s first Prime Minister, Israel’s only [female Prime Minister](#), [Golda Meir](#), [Anwar Sadat](#), the [Egyptian president](#), who traveled to Jerusalem in 1977 to make peace with Israel, [Moses](#), who led the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt to freedom, with the one who lived in the 12th and 13th centuries [the great Jewish scholar Maimonides](#), with whom former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, [Lord Jonathan Sacks](#), [Sigmund Freud](#), the founder of psychoanalysis, [Albert Einstein](#), the founder of the theory of relativity, [Robert Oppenheimer](#), the “father of the atomic bomb,” and Hollywood icon and inventor [Hedy Lamarr](#).