



Levi Strauss on the Future of Jews in the U.S. and Europe: “We must not let ourselves be driven out!”

About the Person

Hardly any other product is as ubiquitous in our daily lives today as the one that Levi Strauss created over 150 years ago together with his business partner Jacob Davis: jeans. Born in Bavaria in 1829, Loeb Strauss—as he was originally named—emigrated to New York in 1847 with his widowed mother and his youngest siblings. In the wake of the Gold Rush, he settled in San Francisco in 1853 and opened the company Levi Strauss & Co., which manufactured and sold workwear for laborers. Together with Jacob Davis, he received a patent in 1873 for pants whose pockets were reinforced with copper rivets. With this, Strauss and Davis laid the foundation for the global success of denim pants. Levi Strauss died in 1902. The company he founded, “Levi Strauss & Co.,” remains family-owned to this day and is run by his descendants. With the help of the AI assistant Grok, FokusIsrael.ch spoke with Levi Strauss about his family history, the success of his work pants, calls for boycotts against Jewish businesses, and the future of Jews in the U.S. and Europe.

From Sacha Wigdorovits

Mr. Strauss, your family is originally from Bavaria. What was the reason you emigrated to the United States with your mother and siblings in 1847?

Levi Strauss: In Buttenheim, Bavaria, as a Jewish family we faced many restrictions—we weren’t allowed to own land and often encountered prejudice. After my father’s early death in 1846, my mother, Rebecca, decided that we could find a better life in America. In 1847, we went to New York to join my brothers. There, we found freedom and opportunities for hard work. It was the right move.

Today, New York is led by a mayor who is very anti-Semitic. Would you still move to New York again, or would you rather go somewhere else?

Levi Strauss: That kind of hostility wouldn’t have surprised me—we Jews knew it well from Bavaria. Still, I probably would have gone back to New York anyway, because my brothers were already there and a business was waiting for us. Family and hard work matter more than the words of a single man. Despite everything, America has given me freedom.

How have you personally experienced anti-Semitism?

Levi Strauss: As a boy in Bavaria, I often felt looked down upon. My father, who was



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a peddler, had a hard time. Things were better in New York and San Francisco, but there was prejudice there, too. I responded with hard work, honesty, and the support of my Jewish community—and that earned me respect.

Was that one of the reasons you always generously supported the Jewish community in San Francisco, where you later moved?

Levi Strauss: Yes. A strong community provides support and dignity. In San Francisco, I was happy to help build Temple Emanu-El and support the Hebrew School, orphanages, and widows. Once I had achieved success, I wanted to help those who were just starting out—just as my family once had. It is both a duty and a joy. We Jews must stand together, especially in a new country.

Why did you actually move from New York to San Francisco?

Levi Strauss: In 1853, news of the great California Gold Rush reached us in New York. My brothers and I saw an opportunity to establish a business in the West. I traveled by ship via Panama to San Francisco and opened Levi Strauss & Co. as a wholesale dry goods business. The miners needed clothing and tools—it was an excellent market. That was the beginning of my own journey.

How were the famous Levi’s jeans created?

Levi Strauss: It all started with a tailor from Nevada: Jacob Davis. He was a customer of mine and bought my sturdy denim fabric. In 1872, he wrote to me, saying he was reinforcing pants with copper rivets on the pockets so they wouldn’t tear during hard work. Since he didn’t have the money for a patent, he proposed a partnership. In 1873, we were granted the patent together. That’s how the first riveted “waist overalls”—later known as Levi’s jeans—were created. The demand was enormous.

So Jacob Davis was actually the inventor of the Levi’s trademark—the rivets on the pants pockets—not you.

Levi Strauss: Yes, that’s right. Jacob Davis had the brilliant idea of using rivets and first applied them to pants for miners. I supplied the fabric and made the partnership and the financing of the patent possible. Together, we scaled up production. It was a great collaboration—his ingenuity and my business acumen. Without Jacob Davis, riveted jeans wouldn’t exist.



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Back then, would you and Jacob Davis have believed that your jeans would become a global success that continues to this day?

Levi Strauss: To be honest: No. We knew that the riveted pants would be in high demand among workers because they lasted much longer. But we never would have dreamed that they would one day become a global fashion trend and even be worn by women and in peacetime. We had in mind practical work clothes for the American West. The success surprised and delighted both of us.

How did you actually meet Jacob Davis: Was it a “Jewish connection”?

Levi Strauss: No . Jacob Davis was a tailor and a customer of my wholesale business in San Francisco. He regularly bought my heavy denim fabric for tents, tarps, and work clothes. This business relationship is what brought us together. The fact that we were both Jewish immigrants certainly fostered additional trust, but the impetus for our partnership was purely business-related.

Today, Jewish companies and Jewish artists everywhere are facing threats of boycotts. Have you also had to deal with such problems?

Levi Strauss: Yes . In my day, there were also boycotts and prejudice against Jewish businesspeople, especially in Europe. In America, it was less common, but mistrust existed here as well. I always responded to it with better quality, fair prices, and honesty. My success came from hard work. And I never hid who I was. The only things that help against blind hatred are steadfastness and the respect you earn through achievement.

What was your stance on Zionism back then? Were you familiar with Theodor Herzl?

Levi Strauss: Theodor Herzl and his ideas became well known toward the end of my life. I understood the desire for a Jewish homeland—after all we had suffered in Europe. Nevertheless, my life was centered in America. It was here that I found freedom and success. I firmly believed in the promise of this country.

Do you still believe that America is safe for Jews—after all the anti-Semitism that is openly on display here today as well?

Levi Strauss: America has given me and many Jews freedom and success like no other country. Yet I am concerned to see old hatred resurfacing—at universities, on the streets, and in politics. It pains me. But America is still a better place for Jews



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than many other places. But we must stand up for ourselves here, too—through education, strong communities, and achievement.

Isn't it safer for Jews in the U.S. and Europe to emigrate to Israel?

Levi Strauss: Many Jews have found a home in Israel that protects them—I deeply respect that. And the Anti-Semitism is an old phenomenon that keeps resurfacing, even in America and Europe. Nevertheless, I believe that Jews can have a future outside of Israel as well—through strength, community, and valuable contributions to society. Israel is an important refuge, but we must not allow ourselves to be driven out. *Note : This interview was conducted with the help of AI. It is based on statements by Levi Strauss and reports about him. As part of our series “Conversations with Legends,” we use AI to engage in dialogue with deceased figures from the worlds of politics, religion, science, business, and culture who are significant to Judaism, Israel, and our society, in order to bring them and their ideas closer to today’s audience. Previous interviews in this series have featured 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,” the Hollywood icon and inventor [Hedy Lamarr](#), the entrepreneur [Estée Lauder](#) and [Milton Friedman](#), the Nobel laureate in economics.*