



Robert Oppenheimer, did you help Israel build the atomic bomb?

Summary

- Robert Oppenheimer, born in 1904 into a secular Jewish family in New York, is considered the “father of the atomic bomb.”
- He was a theoretical physicist and headed the Los Alamos research laboratory, where the United States developed the first atomic bomb.
- During the anti-communist McCarthy era, Oppenheimer fell victim to the United States Atomic Energy Commission (AEC).
- In a show trial, the AEC accused him and his wife of having had ties to communists in the past.
- The real reason for the trial, however, was Oppenheimer’s refusal to participate in the development of the hydrogen bomb.
- Using AI, FokusIsrael.ch interviewed Robert Oppenheimer—who died in 1967—about the atomic bomb, ethics in science, Albert Einstein, anti-Semitism, and Israel.

From Sacha Wigdorovits

Robert Oppenheimer, you led the development and construction of the first atomic bomb: Do you feel guilty?

Robert Oppenheimer: Physicists have, in a raw sense, come to know sin, and they cannot lose that knowledge. I feel the burden. It is “the blood on my hands,” as I once told President Truman. Yet we acted in a just war against a barbaric threat. It was not an easy decision, and the cruelty remains.

You are often referred to as the “father of the atomic bomb.” How does that make you feel?

Robert Oppenheimer: It is a heavy burden that has been placed on me. I was the



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head of the laboratory, but many brilliant minds worked on it. It honors science, yet it constantly reminds me of the destructive power we unleashed. I am neither proud nor indifferent—it is a complex legacy.

Do you believe that the atomic bomb has made the world safer through nuclear deterrence?

Robert Oppenheimer: The bomb has changed the nature of warfare. It created a terrifying balance of deterrence that helped prevent a major war. Yet it poses the danger of annihilation. International oversight and transparency are therefore essential.

Where do you draw the line when it comes to ethics in science?

Robert Oppenheimer: A scientist's curiosity knows no bounds—we must discover what nature conceals. But the application of this knowledge is another matter. The line is crossed when we create something that threatens humanity as a whole without society having decided on it. Ethics in science is especially important when the technical allure of a discovery outweighs the wisdom required to handle it.

Did you consider the development of the atomic bomb to be ethically justifiable?

Robert Oppenheimer: We built the bomb because otherwise the enemy would have destroyed us. But afterward I learned this: A scientist must not decide on his own what powers he hands over to the world.

Why did you refuse to participate in the development of the hydrogen bomb?

Robert Oppenheimer: The hydrogen bomb is a weapon capable of wiping out entire civilizations. I was convinced it would escalate the arms race and put humanity in even greater danger. After Hiroshima, we saw the need for control, not for even more destructive weapons.

The United States Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) conducted a show trial against you. Did your Jewish heritage play a role in that?

Robert Oppenheimer: The investigation was a farce. My past connections and my opposition to the H-bomb were exploited. Anti-Semitism certainly played a role—many intellectuals were suspected at the time simply because they were Jewish. I was angry and felt isolated, but I remained true to the truth.



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Have you personally experienced anti-Semitism?

Robert Oppenheimer: Yes , in a subtle way. As a young man, I sensed prejudice in academic circles. I could tell from remarks like, “He’s Jewish, but without the usual traits.” Anti-Semitism was never as overt here back then as it was in Europe, but it permeated the American elite.

How did you react to that?

Robert Oppenheimer: I responded by defining myself more strongly as an American and a scientist. Experiencing anti-Semitism heightened my awareness of injustice without turning me into a Zionist.

You were secular and fully assimilated: How do you explain the fact that you nevertheless became a victim of anti-Semitic attacks?

Robert Oppenheimer: Anti-Semitism doesn’t ask about assimilation or faith. To many, I remained “Oppenheimer the Jew,” even though I never set foot in a synagogue and saw myself as a cosmopolitan intellectual. In the 1930s, and especially during the security hearings in 1954 (the McCarthy Committee, Ed.), it became clear that one’s background mattered more than one’s self-definition.

What lessons have you learned from this?

Robert Oppenheimer: For me, it was bitter proof that prejudice runs deeper than cultural adaptation. I learned that you cannot completely shed your own identity—and that in times of crisis, it is used against you.

How would you describe your relationship to Judaism and Israel?

Robert Oppenheimer: I come from a secular Jewish family and did not identify much with the faith or its rituals. I have a cultural connection to Judaism, especially in light of the persecution in the 1930s. I respect Israel as a refuge and intellectual center for the Jewish people, not for Zionist reasons.

You see Israel as an intellectual hub. Is that why you support the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot?

Robert Oppenheimer: The Weizmann Institute stands for basic research and progress in a young country. It is an honor to support it. The Weizmann Institute



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embodies the human spirit of discovery, which I value, regardless of politics. Science knows no boundaries.

Albert Einstein was a Zionist. Did you talk to him about Zionism and Israel?

Robert Oppenheimer: Einstein and I often talked about physics and ethics, and less in detail about Zionism. He had a deeper emotional connection to it than I did. We shared a concern for humanity, but our views on a Jewish homeland differed somewhat.

Did you help Israel build the atomic bomb?

Robert Oppenheimer: No . My consultations in Israel were purely scientific in nature—for example, at the Weizmann Institute—and had nothing to do with military programs. My role was to promote peaceful research and international cooperation.

But do you believe that Israel has the atomic bomb?

Robert Oppenheimer: I don't speculate about secret government programs. But in a hostile region like the Middle East, such a capability could serve as a deterrent, just as it does elsewhere. Ultimately, however, the world must move toward nuclear disarmament—for all nations. A threat to one's very existence justifies defense, but it also carries immense risks.

Looking back, what would you do differently today?

Robert Oppenheimer: I would fight harder for international control of nuclear energy to prevent the arms race. Personally, I would be more humble and less naive when it comes to political matters. Advancing science is the right thing to do—but applying it correctly remains an eternal challenge.

Remark: This interview was conducted with the help of the AI assistant Grok. It is based on the writings and other statements by J. Robert Oppenheimer. 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. The [The first such interview took place with Theodor Herzl](#) the founder of modern Zionism, [the second with Chaim Weizmann](#) Israel's first president, the third with [David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel](#) the



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fourth with Israel's only female prime minister to date [Prime Minister, Golda Meir](#), the fifth with [Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian president](#) who traveled to Jerusalem in 1977 to make peace with Israel, the sixth with [Moses, who led the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery to freedom](#), the seventh, along with the one who lived in the 12th and 13th centuries [the great Jewish scholar Maimonides](#); the eighth interview was with the [former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Lord Jonathan Sacks](#), and the ninth with [Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis](#), and the tenth with [Albert Einstein, the founder of the theory of relativity](#).