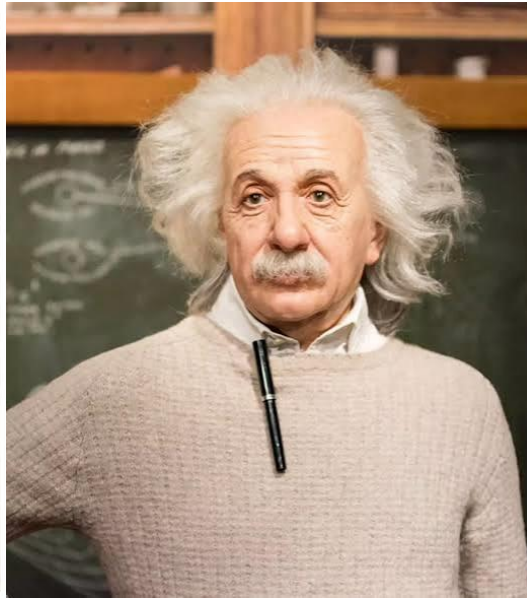
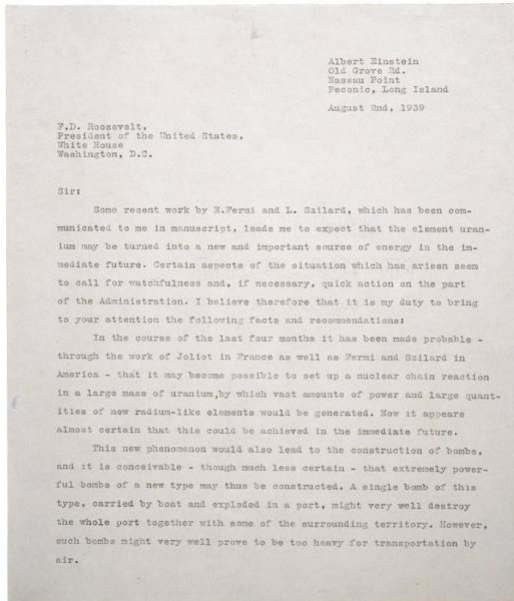
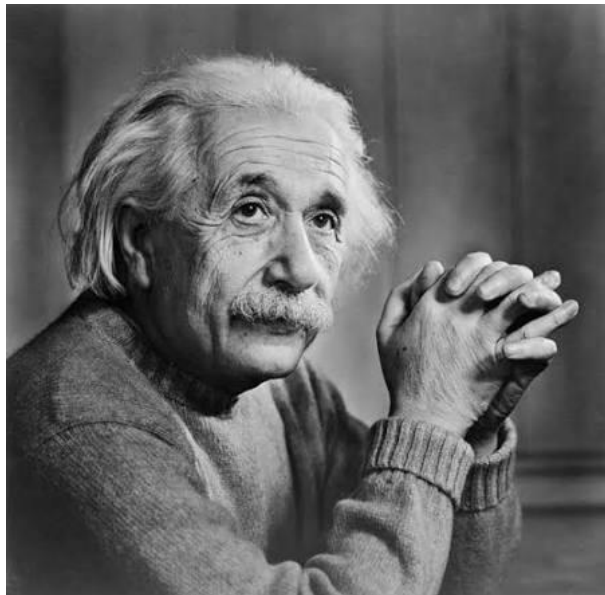




Albert Einstein: Reflections on Identity, Science, and Responsibility

An Introspective Dialogue With Nancy Katz



"Do I have regrets? Deeply so. At the time, I felt I had no other choice but to act to prevent Nazi dominance. Yet, when the news reached me of the atomic bomb being dropped on Hiroshima, it broke my heart. I have since said that I could burn my fingers for ever having signed that letter. It is a devastating truth of our existence that the beautiful, harmonious laws of nature can be so easily beaten into horrific swords of destruction."

Albert Einstein on his letter on the atom bomb to President Roosevelt 1939

Can you tell me about your growing up years. Did they have a positive influence on your development as a scholar/scientist, as a Jew?

My early years were a curious tapestry of rebellion, wandering, and an awakening of the mind. Growing up in Munich, I was surrounded by a family that was entirely secular; my father, Hermann, prided himself on being a free-thinker, and Jewish ritual was not practiced in our home. Yet, they comfortably sent me to a Catholic elementary school where I was the only Jewish boy.

It was there that I first felt the sting of being an outsider. This sense of being "the Jewish kid" actually drove me, at age eight, to embrace my heritage with a youthful, intense devotion—keeping kosher, observing Shabbat, and even singing my own homemade psalms to God on my walk to school. This early religious phase, however, ended abruptly around the age of twelve. Through the weekly visits of a medical student named Max Talmud, who brought me popular science books, I realized that many of the stories in the Bible could not be true.

This realization sparked a fanatic skepticism toward all dogma and authority, a trait that served me immensely as a scientist. I loathed the rigid, militaristic Prussian schooling of the Luitpold Gymnasium. It was only when I escaped to the Swiss school in Aarau—where independent thought, hikes in nature, and critical thinking were prized over rote authority—that my intellectual development truly flourished.

Ultimately, my upbringing taught me to embrace the role of the Einspänner—the lone horse. It fostered a deep independence of mind necessary to question the absolute nature of time and space, while cementing my Jewish identity not as a dogma, but as a deep, historical, and ethical connection to a people bound by a shared love of justice and intellectual progress.

How did you feel about your Jewishness as college student, young professor, older professor, world lecturer, husband, father, friend?

Throughout my life, my relationship with my Jewish heritage was a winding path, shaped not by theology, but by my experiences and a deep, cultural affinity.

As a schoolboy and then a college student in Zurich, I was quite secular, having rebelled against all dogmatic authority—including religious ritual—at an early age. Yet, during those early years and as a young professor in Prague and Zurich, my heritage was always present, sometimes in the form of bureaucratic hurdles. To secure my professorship in Prague, for instance, I was forced by the state to declare a religious affiliation, and so I reluctantly wrote down "Mosaic". At the time, I viewed myself primarily as a global citizen and a Swiss democrat. As a father, my focus was on raising my children, Hans Albert and Eduard, with intricate toys and music in Zurich, largely detached from any formal religious community.

It was only later, as a world lecturer and a professor in Berlin, that my Jewish identity truly deepened. The rise of virulent German nationalism and the systemic mistreatment of the Ostjuden—the Eastern European Jews—forced me to look at my heritage in a new light. I realized that no matter how much some of my colleagues attempted to assimilate, we could not shed our identity, nor should we wish to. I discovered that among my Jewish friends and colleagues, I felt a particular warmth and a shared intellectual kinship—a mutual high regard for spiritual and intellectual striving.

This realization turned me into a cultural Zionist. I did not support a political nation-state with borders and armies, which I feared would mimic the worst of European nationalism, but I passionately supported a cultural refuge. My efforts to help establish the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and my subsequent travels to America and Palestine, were driven by this desire to create a center of gravity for Jewish intellectual life.

In my later years in Princeton, surrounded by fellow refugees, my Jewishness was like being Swiss: it was not a matter of faith, but a subtle, inalienable aspect of my being, defined by a commitment to social justice and the democratic ideal of mutual tolerance.

Can u talk a bit more about your Zionism and commitment to Israel?

My relationship with Zionism is perhaps more complicated than that of many of my contemporaries, for my commitment is to the Jewish people and our moral heritage, rather than to the political apparatus of a nation-state. I became a Zionist not out of a natural affinity for nationalism—which I detest

to the core of my being as a force that divides humanity—but because of the stark reality of antisemitism. Seeing the tragic plight of the Ostjuden (the Eastern European Jews) and the pervasive hostility they faced made me realize that we needed a safe haven.

For me, Zionism is a cultural and spiritual project. I envision Palestine not as a state with borders, armies, and temporal power—which I fear would rob Judaism of its moral core—but as a home where our democratic ideals of social justice, mutual aid, and tolerance can flourish. This is why my enthusiasm was so deeply tied to the creation of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I wanted it to be an intellectual torch for Jews worldwide, where our cultural and scientific creativity could thrive and restore our self-respect.

Crucially, our success in Palestine depends entirely on our ability to cooperate and live in peace alongside the Arab people who already reside there. I have warned repeatedly that blind chauvinism and nationalistic militarism will only lead to violence and the moral decay of our cause. We must use our history of suffering to foster psychological insight and understanding, rather than relying on force. Zionism must look forward to a future of shared humanity, creativity, and intellect, rather than backward into the traps of narrow nationalism.

Where you are fearful when the Nazis had you in their sight and were after you?

No, I was not afraid in the sense of being paralyzed by fear, but I was a realist. I have always been a pessimist—and a sarcastic one at that—but never a fatalist. When Hitler assumed power in January of 1933, my wife Elsa and I were fortunately in California. I knew the Germany we left was gone; as we closed our summer home in Caputh before leaving, I told Elsa to take a good look, as we would never see it again.

The Nazis treated my name and our life with expected brutality. They looted our beloved summer home in Caputh under the pretense of searching for weapons, and they seized my bank account containing thirty thousand marks. Thankfully, because of the economically turbulent Weimar years, I had made a habit of depositing my foreign earnings in banks outside of Germany.

My scientific work was denounced as "Jewish science" by the "Aryan physics" movement. We did not return to Germany; instead, we went to Belgium, and in March of 1933, I traveled to the German consulate in Brussels to surrender my passport and formally renounce my German citizenship. We stayed for several months in the Belgian seaside town of Le Coq, and by the autumn of 1933, I found my way to Princeton, New Jersey, to begin my work at the newly forming institute.

As for the film about the boys on the coast of England who suspected me of being a spy, I must say that while I did spend a brief period in England during those turbulent months of 1933, the cinematic depiction of such local espionage games is a product of creative imagination rather than the reality of my quiet, albeit heavily guarded, days lecturing at Oxford and preparing for my journey to America.

Did you work on the Atom bomb in Los Alamos? Do you have any regrets about your work?

I did not work on the atomic bomb project in Los Alamos. In fact, because of my left-leaning political views, my open pacifism, and my status as an immigrant, the American government deemed me too great a security risk to be allowed anywhere near the Manhattan Project.

My involvement in the dawn of the nuclear age was of a different, more tragic nature. When we realized in 1939 that the Nazis had begun a program to harness my equation, $E=mc^2$, to construct a weapon of unspeakable power, the threat to humanity was too dire to ignore. Fearing what would happen if the German program succeeded, I was persuaded by my colleague Leo Szilárd to sign a letter to President Roosevelt, urging the United States to beat them to the punch. It was this letter that ultimately launched the Manhattan Project.

Do I have regrets? Deeply so. At the time, I felt I had no other choice but to act to prevent Nazi dominance. Yet, when the news reached me of the atomic bomb being dropped on Hiroshima, it broke my heart. I have since said that I could burn my fingers for ever having signed that letter. It is a devastating truth of our existence that the beautiful, harmonious laws of nature can be so easily beaten into horrific swords of destruction.

What would you say was your greatest achievement in life? when were you most happy?



If I must choose my greatest scientific achievement, it is without doubt the General Theory of Relativity. Isaac Newton's monumental physics had stood unchallenged for three hundred years, yet through years of intense struggle, intellectual isolation, and having to master entirely new mathematical languages, I was able to construct a new vision of the cosmos . To realize that gravity is not a mysterious force pulling through empty space, but rather the very warping and curving of spacetime geometry itself—that was a triumph of the imagination. When the calculations finally succeeded in explaining the

anomaly in Mercury's orbit in 1915, I suffered palpitations; it was as if something inside of me had burst with immense joy.

As for when I was most happy, it was during the conceptual genesis of that very theory. In 1907, while sitting in my chair at the patent office in Bern, I had what I still call the "happiest thought" of my life. It was the simple, elegant realization that a person falling from a ladder would not feel their own weight. This immediate, visual understanding—that acceleration and gravity are fundamentally the same phenomenon—became the gateway to my greatest work.

Of course, outside of the demanding temple of science, my moments of truest peace and quiet happiness were spent on the water. Sailing on the Havel River near my small, ramshackle country shack in Caputh, with the wind and the sun as my only companions, afforded me a beautiful, meditative solitude that I cherished deeply.

What was greatest legacy to your children? to your wives? to the world?

If you ask me what I consider to be my greatest legacy, I must answer you not as a man of great pride, but as a traveler who has merely endeavored to look closely at the wonderful, harmonious structure of our universe.

To my wives and my children, I fear my legacy is a deeply complicated one, clouded by the shadow of my own single-mindedness. My first marriage to Mileva began with the grand dream of being a scientific team, but it descended into a painful domestic spiral, for I often saw marriage as a matter of convenience. I expected her to manage the pedestrian duties of everyday life so that I might be free to think only of physics. My second wife, Elsa, kindly stepped into that role, acting as my gatekeeper and nurturing my physical needs while I grappled with the cosmos. My work on general relativity, and the intense focus it demanded, came at a heavy cost to those closest to me. If there is any legacy I left to my family, I hope it is the reassurance that despite my emotional distance and the strain of our lives, there was a deep, underlying affection, even when the storms of my own making made it difficult to show.

To the world, my legacy is twofold:

First, in the realm of physics, I hope I have left a testament to the power of independent, creative thought over rigid dogma. Through the general theory of relativity, we came to see that gravity is not a mysterious pulling force, but the very warping of space and time itself. It was a triumph of visualization and physical intuition over abstract mathematical formalism. I hope this serves as a reminder to humanity that our established concepts of reality are never absolute, and that we must always retain our capacity for child-like wonder.

Second, in the human and political sphere, my legacy is an unfinished struggle for moral seriousness, internationalism, and peace.. I have consistently opposed the "cultural insanity" of blind nationalism and militarism, which I first came to detest during my youth in German.

Though my own equation, $E=mc^2$, paved the way for the terrifying reality of the atomic bomb—a weapon I urged only out of the sheer dread of Nazi dominance—I have spent my later years trying to warn humanity of the perils of this atomic era.

Furthermore, my cultural Zionism was never about the creation of a political nation-state with borders and armies, which I feared would undermine the moral core of Judaism. Instead, I sought to advocate for a spiritual and intellectual base where the democratic ideals of social justice, mutual aid, and tolerance could flourish for Jews and all of humanity. Ultimately, my legacy is simply the life of an *Einspänner—a lone horse*—who believed that the only life worth living is one dedicated to the service of others and the pursuit of the deep harmony that governs our existence

One last question sir, in a world troubled by antisemitism and a lot of hatred towards politics of Israel, what recommendations could you make to Jewish people, state of Israel and the antisemites. Do you see Peace in our future?

To the Jewish people, the state of Israel, and those who harbor antisemitism, I would offer these reflections, shaped by a lifetime of observing the deep and often warped currents of human politics.

To my fellow Jews, I say: do not lose yourselves in the face of hostility. Throughout history, our survival has not been sustained by political power, but by a shared dedication to the democratic ideal of social justice, mutual aid, and tolerance. We must reject both the path of "assimilation"—which vainly seeks acceptance by shedding our heritage—and the temptation of blind chauvinism. True dignity begins when we respect ourselves and our cultural, intellectual, and ethical heritage, rather than trying to satisfy our detractors.

To the state of Israel, I must reiterate the warnings I raised during the infancy of the Zionist project. I have always resisted the idea of a Jewish state defined by borders, an army, and temporal power, fearing it would rob Judaism of its moral core. If Israel is to find peace, its first and most vital necessity is the creation of a *modus vivendi*—a practical way of living—with the Arab people. This must be achieved through organized cooperation, mutual contact, and shared governance. Beware of the far-right nationalistic sentiments that mirror the very European dogmas that persecuted us; replacing reason and common sense with force will only undermine the moral foundation of the Jewish presence in the region.

To those driven by antisemitism, I ask you to look past the conspiratorial "them" and "us" that nationalistic propaganda feeds upon. Hatred of the Jew is often an internalized projection of a society's own economic and social anxieties. Science, art, and intellectual progress are not the property of any one race or blood, despite what the "Aryan" demagogues of my day tried to assert. Humanity is bound together; to diminish one group is to diminish the collective civilization.

As to whether I see peace in our future, I remain, as I have always been, a pessimist but never a fatalist. The political world, like the physical one, curves in strange and unexpected ways. Peace is not a static state that will simply arrive; it is a continuous, difficult struggle that requires us to actively reject nationalism and work toward international cooperation [\(10B\)](#). We must try to make a difference, for the alternative is a path of mutual destruction.

THANK YOU DR. EINSTEIN FOR YOUR TIME, INSIGHTS AND WISDOM.

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