

MYTH #1:

**JEWIS ARE CHEAP, GREEDY, AND MATERIALISTIC;
JEWIS ARE GOOD WITH MONEY**

Where does it come from?

The myth of Jewish greed dates back at least to the New Testament story of Jesus forcing the Jewish moneychangers out of the Temple. Teachings concerning the “cursed” Jews radiated into all aspects of Christian culture, and notions of Jews as miserly and greedy took hold throughout Christendom. In the Middle Ages, some Jews became moneylenders — in part because they were forbidden to own land or join many of the craft guilds, and in part because the Church had forbidden Christians from practicing usury (lending money at interest). Usury was condemned as a sin, but since Jews were not subject to Christian law, and since kings and nobles needed cash, both the Church and the State appointed Jews as moneylenders and tax-collectors. In a classic example of blaming the messenger, Christians directed their anger at having to pay back loans and taxes against the Jewish moneylenders and tax-collectors.

More recently, some people believe that wealthy or successful Jews have gotten ahead due to cheapness, greed, materialism or their “natural skill with money” rather than through a commitment to education and hard work.

What are the facts?

Like all groups of people, some Jews are good with money; some are not. Some Jews are cheap; some are not. The same could be said for any group of people, whether they are defined by religion, nationality or, for that matter, hair color or weight.

In actuality, many Jews are not wealthy. There is a sizeable population of Jews who live in poverty, both in the United States and around the world. According to one study using data collected from the 2001 National Jewish Population Study, close to 1 million American Jews live in low-income households, defined as those that earn less than 150% of the federal poverty rate, or \$25,000 for a family of four.¹

¹<http://www.jewishla.org/news/html/1104-poverty.html>

According to Jewish tradition, giving money to the poor and to others in need is not just encouraged, it is required. The Hebrew word *tzedakah* is often mistranslated as “charity,” which itself comes from the Latin word “*caritas*” or heart. One gives charity “from the heart,” that is, out of a desire to give. A more accurate translation of *tzedakah* is “righteousness,” implying that *tzedakah* is given because it is the right thing to do, whether one wishes to give or not. According to Jewish law, *tzedakah* is a *mitzvah*, which itself is also often misinterpreted as “good deed.” In fact, *mitzvah* means “commandment.” And, like all commandments in Jewish law, the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah* is a requirement, not just a good deed.

Unlike the Roman rule of commerce, *Caveat Emptor* (let the buyer beware), which puts the burden on the buyer to be wary of unscrupulous sellers, Judaism dictates the opposite. According to Jewish law, the burden is on the seller to ensure that the buyer should benefit from any uncertainty in a transaction. For example, if someone wants to buy a pound of potato salad, Judaism requires the deli clerk to give the buyer a little extra, just in case the scale is not completely accurate.

How can we respond?

The assumption that the actions of a few typify the behavior of all is at the heart of bigotry. Every ethnic or religious group, including Jews, can count greedy or cheap people among its members. The charge that Jews are born greedy (or that greed is a “Jewish” trait) arises from medieval stereotypes of the despised, accursed Jew, and has nothing to do with the actual financial practices of Jews. In responding to someone who claims that Jews are greedy or cheap, you might question the generalization. Simply asking, “what do you mean by that?” may be effective; always push people to back up their generalizations with facts.

Be prepared, as well, with examples that deflate myths and stereotypes (and that do not perpetuate stereotypes about other groups). If, for instance, someone complains that Jewish landlords exploit their tenants, you might ask that person about knowledge of the records of non-Jewish landlords. You might also ask, “if a Christian storeowner were dishonest with you, would you describe the owner as a dishonest *Christian* merchant or just a dishonest merchant? If the owner were Jewish, would s/he be a dishonest merchant or a dishonest *Jewish* merchant?”

Finally, the myth that Jews are cheap is disproved by the entire Jewish tradition of *tzedakah*. In America, this religious call has resulted in a splendid record of Jewish philanthropy. It may be helpful to point out that Judaism urges generous giving, and not merely to Jewish causes. The 2001 National Jewish Population Survey found that 71% of Jews give to Jewish causes and 62% give to non-Jewish causes.

American Jewish philanthropists have included Julius Rosenwald, who built schools for Black children in the South during the 1930s; Nathan Strauss, who set up milk deposits which distributed pasteurized milk and infant formulas to families in poor areas of New York; Adolphus S. Solomons, who in conjunction with Clara Barton laid the foundation for the American Red Cross; and the Guggenheims, who established the Guggenheim Foundation to support the arts and artists in America.

This information is helpful as a demonstration of both the moral teachings of Judaism as well as the ethical practices of Jews. However, even presented with these facts, there will be some who maintain negative stereotypes, and it may sometimes be best to ignore these attitudes. As David Lloyd George, Prime Minister of Britain in the early 20th century, once said of anti-Semitic zealots: “In the sight of these fanatics, Jews today can do nothing right. If they are rich, they are birds of prey. If they are poor, they are vermin. ... If they give generously — and there are no more liberal givers than the Jews — they are doing it for some selfish purpose of their own. If they don't give, then what would you expect of a Jew?”

One last point: Out of simple ignorance or innocent thoughtlessness, many people use the phrase “Jewing someone down” to refer to haggling or other negotiation over price. You can let such people know that the phrase is offensive by using statements of personal feeling such as: “When you say, ‘He Jewed me down,’ it makes me feel like you are attacking me and my religion.” You can also ask someone what he or she means by the phrase. Many people are just repeating a phrase they heard someone else use and don't understand its offensive nature. This is a teachable moment — an opportunity to inform the person about the negative message the phrase sends.