

## Supplementary Readings:

### **Myths and Facts:**

Myth #1: Jews are cheap, greedy, and materialistic; Jews 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 money changers 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 kings and nobles needed money to build churches and castles, 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, just like anyone else.

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 one 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.

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 (zeh DAH kah) 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.

Myth #2: Jews control the banks, media, Hollywood, and even the U.S. government; Jews have a secret plot to take over the world.

Where does it come from?

Anti-Semites point to “The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion” as proof of a Jewish conspiracy to dominate world political and economic sectors as well as media. This proven forgery, written by agents of the Russian czar in the late 19th century, claims to be the minutes of a secret meeting of Jews that details plans of Jewish leaders to rule the world. The proven forgery spread throughout the 20th century and continues to this day to promote the stereotype that the Jews own the banks and control the media.

In 2004, much of the Arab world watched a television mini-series based on “The Protocols” produced by the government of Syria and presented as the truth to its viewers. Among many lies, the broadcast included depictions of Jews killing a Christian boy for blood to make matzah for Passover and the brutal execution of a Jewish merchant by his fellow Jews for keeping his store open on the Sabbath.

The reality is that in societies like the U.S. that have extended rights and freedoms to Jews, many Jewish people have succeeded. For example, in the 109th Congress (2005–2007 congressional term), 11 Senators identify as Jews. Their success, however, is not the result of some secret Jewish conspiracy to rule the world.

This myth is also related to the misperception that Jews are different, alien people with strange powers to control others. Some people who have never met Jews or do not know them well, can build up some strange ideas about what Jews are like. During different historical periods, Jews were accused of killing Christian children, causing plagues, and setting out to destroy Christian society. If something went wrong, the Jews were said to have planned it. Today, there are even those who claim that AIDS was invented by Jewish doctors.

What are the facts?

It is easier to blame one group for everything bad that happens rather than try to understand the complex and multifaceted causes of problems. Conspiracy theories have always tended to be popular in difficult economic times, and Jews often surface as the traditional scapegoat. Many white supremacist groups today thrive on conspiracy theories and blame not only Jews, but also African Americans, immigrants, and even the Federal Government for everything that goes wrong.

The charge that Jews have been trying to take over the world is especially absurd in light of Jewish history. In almost every country where Jews have lived, they have been a small minority and have experienced centuries of persecution.

Jews have played a large part in the development of the movie industry and some find themselves in high-profile positions. Steven Spielberg and Barbra Streisand, among others, are examples of Jewish people with much status and power in Hollywood, but one only needs to watch the Academy Awards to see that Jews do not dominate the movie industry. Likewise, Jews constitute a small minority of the heads of Fortune 500 companies such as IBM, Exxon, and GE.

### Myth and Facts #3: Jews think they are better than everyone else.

#### Where does it come from?

According to Judaism, the Jews are the “chosen people.” This concept has been misunderstood by both Jews and non-Jews alike. Many people have come to believe that by calling themselves the chosen people, Jews are declaring that they think they are better than other religious and ethnic groups.

#### What are the facts?

Being the chosen people does not mean that Jews have greater privileges than non-Jews. Rather, according to Jewish law, being the chosen people means that they have a special responsibility to uphold Jewish ethical teachings.

The idea comes from a portion of the Torah (the Jewish bible) in which the Jewish people were “chosen” to accept the responsibilities of the Torah and to be a “light unto the nations,” that is, an example of good behavior for all. But the “chosen people” concept has been twisted over time by some who say that the title proves that Jews think they are better than those who are not Jewish.

Jews, like most groups, are proud of their heritage and identity. However, this does not make them better than anyone else. Orthodox Jews interpret the “chosen people” idea to mean that they have a responsibility to keep the 613 commandments of the Torah. All sects of Judaism have acted on this ethical responsibility through their work on social issues. Moreover, Judaism espouses the concept of the righteous gentile, whereby someone who is not Jewish and who follows the Seven Laws of Noah (requirements that establishes moral interaction, justice compassion for all of humanity) will receive the same rewards after death as a righteous Jew. Jews do not view being Jewish as an exclusive status reserved only for those who happen to be born into the faith. According to Jewish law, anyone can convert to Judaism by accepting the same responsibilities as the other members of the faith.

## **Jews United for Justice**

### MISSION: THINK JEWISHLY, ACT LOCALLY

Jews United for Justice leads Jews from the Greater Washington area and Baltimore to act on our shared Jewish values by pursuing justice and equality in our local community.

We are a community of folks of all ages and from all over the greater Washington area and Baltimore. JUFJ provides Jews with an opportunity to weave together Judaism and activism and creates a community in which to explore and strengthen commitments to both.

Jewish tradition calls us to work for tikkun olam (repairing the world). Once slaves in Egypt--and strangers in many lands since--we learn from our history and liturgy the importance of adding our voices to a universal call for justice. As members of a community that has experienced both prejudice and privilege, we have a unique commitment to social justice wherever we find ourselves.

Since 1998 JUFJ has connected everyday Jews to powerful, effective grassroots activism in solidarity with low income communities of color. We use the tools of community organizing, education, and leadership development to win meaningful changes that benefit all area residents and ensure that our city and region are a place where all people can live and thrive.

By mobilizing Jews, JUFJ has expanded the base of support for a broad array of economic, social, and racial justice issues, and has played key leadership roles in protecting critical safety net services, making DC's tax system more progressive by raising taxes on the very wealthy, winning same-sex marriage equality and immigrant education rights, guaranteeing paid sick leave for all DC workers, and raising the minimum wage in the District, in Montgomery County, and across the state of Maryland. These campaigns impact the lives of hundreds of thousands of area residents.

As Jews of the greater Washington and Baltimore region, we strive to be agents of change, repairing the world by concentrating on issues of local concern.