



# **Challenging Anti-Semitism: Debunking the Myths & Responding with Facts**

*Students Handouts and  
Supporting Materials for Teachers*

## **Using Facts to Respond to Anti-Semitism (Grades 8 – 12)**

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**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 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 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

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

**Answer the questions below:**

Where does this myth come from?

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What are the facts?

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How would you refute this myth if asked about it?

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**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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 109<sup>th</sup> 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.

**Answer the questions below:**

Where does this myth come from?

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What are the facts?

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How would you refute this myth if asked about it?

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**MYTH #3: Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus*****Where does it come from?***

The belief that the Jews killed Jesus grew out of interpretations of the trial and crucifixion portions of the New Testament in the Christian bible. The Gospels describe Jewish religious leaders delivering Jesus to Roman authorities with the request that they execute him for blasphemy and public menace. In the Gospel of Matthew (27:25), it is written that Jews cried out, "His blood be on us and our children," as they demanded his crucifixion. As a result, Christians have historically held Jews collectively responsible for the death of Jesus.

***What are the facts?***

Crucifixion, the particular method used to execute Jesus, is forbidden by Jewish law. Moreover, Jesus did not commit any crime that is punishable by death according to Jewish law. It is widely agreed upon by current scholars that Jesus was executed by the Roman rulers of Israel, the same Romans who also executed tens of thousands of other Jews by crucifixion, including two others on the day Jesus was executed.

The myth of Jewish responsibility for Jesus' death is embedded in 2,000 years worth of Christian teaching and Western culture, starting with the gospels' attempt to define who the true Jews were. While most people respect the rights of others to adhere to the tenets of their religion, there has been a historic resentment against Jews by many Christians who cannot understand why Jesus has been so stubbornly rejected. Beginning in the Middle Ages, Christians believed that Jews desecrated communion wafers and killed Christian children to use their blood for matzah (the famous "blood libel"). Today, these issues come up in all sorts of ways, from history classes where the Crusades are taught as heroic times (thousands of Jews were slaughtered during this period) to literature and media that suggest Jewish responsibility for Jesus' death. The most recent widespread example is Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. In Mr. Gibson's film, there is absolutely no ambiguity as to who is responsible for the death of Jesus -- it is the Jews.

According to Christian theologian Carl Evans, "From the New Testament times to the present, it is difficult to find a single period when the Church has not acted shamefully toward the Jews. I'm convinced that anti-Semitism has been such a powerful and persistent nemesis largely because of the Church's false witness against the Jews." To this day, some Christian children are still being taught that "Jews are Christ-killers" and "Jews drink the blood of Christians."

However persistent these myths may be, the Catholic Church has recently made significant steps to correct them. In 1965, the Vatican Council officially declared that Jesus' death "cannot be charged against all Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today." In 1992, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (a teaching guide) noted that no one is certain of what happened 2,000 years ago and that Jews as a collective group should not be considered responsible for the crucifixion.

**Answer the questions below:**

Where does this myth come from?

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What are the facts?

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How would you refute this myth if asked about it?

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**STUDENT HANDOUT**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**MYTH #4: 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.

**Answer the questions below:**

Where does this myth come from?

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What are the facts?

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How would you refute this myth if asked about it?

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**MYTH #5: Jews / Israel perpetuated or had advanced knowledge of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks**

***Where does it come from?***

Immediately after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, rumors began circulating that the airplane hijackings and subsequent crashing of the planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon had been the work of Israel's secret service, the Mossad. At the heart of this propaganda, named the "Big Lie," were stereotypical messages: "Only the Israelis could have been skilled enough, only Jews could have been smart enough to plan and execute such a complicated and intricate plot." There is another virulently anti-Semitic assumption underlying this notion: "Only Jews could have been evil enough."

Another version of this falsehood is that Jews had advance knowledge of the attacks; that Jewish employees were secretly warned not to go to work that day. In fact, then poet laureate from New Jersey, Amiri Baraka's poem, a lengthy diatribe about September 11<sup>th</sup>, repeats the conspiracy about Jews and Israel having foreknowledge of the attacks and the false rumor that 4,000 Israelis did not show up for work at the World Trade Center.

***What are the facts?***

The September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks were perpetrated by members of the terrorist organization Al Qaeda. Jews and Israelis had no knowledge of the attacks. Of the 2,996<sup>2</sup> victims who died during the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, an estimated 400 victims were Jews, including at least two Israeli citizens. The primary propagators of the lie that Jews were somehow behind the terrorist plot are the Arab and Muslim media in the Middle East, attempting to deflect blame from their brethren onto Jews and Israel.

The September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks were perpetrated by 19 members of Al Qaeda, ten of whom hijacked and flew two passenger airplanes into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, five of whom hijacked and flew another passenger airplane into the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and another four who died when the passengers on a fourth hijacked airplane rose up and prevented the hijackers from crashing that airplane into the White House.

**Answer the questions below:**

Where does this myth come from?

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.september11victims.com/september11victims/>

What are the facts?

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How would you refute this myth if asked about it?

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**Case Study # 1: Being Good With Money**

When your friend Tammy was elected to the school council last year, one of her campaign promises was that spring dance was going to be the best ever. When January came, Tammy asked you to be part of the spring dance committee and you agreed. At the first meeting Tammy starts assigning committee roles. When she gets to your friend Sheryl and puts her in charge of raising money for the dance you are surprised because Sheryl is an amazing artist and you believe she would be put in charge of decorations. You speak up and recommend Sheryl be in charge of decorations. Tammy says in front of everyone, “No, I need Sheryl to be in charge of money because she’s Jewish and everyone knows Jews are good with money.”

What anti-Semitic myth is this situation based on?

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What facts can you give to disprove the myth?

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**Turn over to continue**

What else can you do or say in response to this situation?

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**Case Study # 2: Controlling Everything**

You are over at your friend Greg’s house finishing up a group project for your current events class on U.S. foreign policy during the last four years. You are just about to leave when Greg’s mom comes in and asks what you are working on. You and Greg spend a few minutes talking about the time line you’ve created and the poster full of charts. When you are finished she nods in approval and says, “I wonder what our foreign policy would be like if the Jews weren’t controlling everything.”

What anti-Semitic myth is this situation based on?

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What facts can you give to disprove the myth?

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**Turn over to continue**

What else can you do or say in response to this situation?

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**Case Study # 3: The Movies**

You and your high school friends Thomas and Christine decide to go to see Mel Gibson’s new movie *The Passion of the Christ*. The three of you know nothing about the movie, except that it was produced by Mel Gibson, an actor you all love from movies like *Braveheart*, and *What Women Want*. As you enter the theater, you see that some of the people leaving the theater are crying, and you all get a little nervous as you take your seats.

After the movie has ended, you look over at Thomas and Christine. Christine is crying, and Thomas looks shocked. As they leave the theater Christine says, “I cannot believe those *Jews* were responsible for killing Jesus!” Thomas gets upset and exclaims that he is Jewish and that the Jews were *not* responsible for killing Jesus. Thomas looks over at you for help.

What anti-Semitic myth is this situation based on?

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What facts can you give to disprove the myth?

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**Turn over to continue**

What else can you do or say in response to this situation?

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**STUDENT HANDOUT**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Case Study # 4: Excused from School**

You are sitting in your math class when the bell rings and the teacher starts taking roll call. When she gets to Josh Weinberg’s name she doesn’t bother to call it out, and continues on with the roll call. John leans over to you and asks, “Where’s Josh?” You have no idea and are about to answer when Heather leans over and says, “Oh, don’t you know? Josh is Jewish and today’s supposed to be a Jewish holiday. On top of that, Josh says that there was a Jewish New Year’s celebration last week, which was why he didn’t come to school then. He gets out of class assignments and tests so often! It’s so unfair! You know Jews think they are better than everyone else.”

What anti-Semitic myth is this situation based on?

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What facts can you give to disprove the myth?

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**Turn over to continue**

What else can you do or say in response to this situation?

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**STUDENT HANDOUT**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Case Study # 5: The September 11th Remark**

It's the start of the school year, and you and your friends are trying to decide what to do after school. You suggest attending the September 11<sup>th</sup> memorial service to remember the lives lost from the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania. Your friend says with a snicker, "There won't be a single Jew at that service. I heard that the Jews knew that it was going to happen, but didn't tell anyone. They all stayed home that day, you know." You look around the group, and notice that one of your friends, who is Jewish, looks really mad but doesn't say anything.

What anti-Semitic myth is this situation based on?

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What facts can you give to disprove the myth?

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**Turn over to continue**

What else can you do or say in response to this situation?

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