

Dispelling false beliefs about Jews

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WHEN I was growing up in Albuquerque, N.M., none of our neighbors was Jewish, and most were indifferent to or respectful of my Jewishness. Only the red-haired kids up the street who went to the Catholic school were mean. They chased my siblings and me down the street, throwing rocks and yelling, "Christ-killers! Christ-killers."

Being 7 or 8, I figured they were just the neighborhood bullies. But when Pope John XXIII officially exonerated the world's Jews — past, present and

from Page 1E

who believe these myths seem like good people. But the myths continue to spawn and foster convoluted rationalizations for hateful sentiments about — and actions against — Jewish people. These myths are so entrenched that, reading this, some of you may find you thought these myths were real and see nothing wrong with them.

They are not true. And there is a great deal wrong with them. They make Judaism out to be a punitive, cold, unloving religion, and its people judgmental and lacking compassion. Nothing could be further from the Judaism I grew up with, identify with and teach my children.

There are five fallacies about Judaism I've noticed among students and, sorry to say, some non-Jewish associates and colleagues. My response to these might be considered that of an average U.S. Jew — neither terribly observant nor overly assimilated. Just your average run-of-the-mill Jewish person.

MYTH 1: The Jewish God is wrathful and punitive.

My Response: I learned very early that the Hebrew words for compassion and mercy are also names and attributes of God. In fact, the Torah begins and ends with acts of God's loving kindness. The rabbis point out, "At the beginning of the Torah, God clothes Adam, and at its end, He buries Moses."

The hardest Jewish idea to get across to my students is that a person and God have a direct relationship that involves discussion, argument, negotiation, promises, disappointments and forgiveness. Moses didn't always like what God asked of him. They made deals and struck compromises. If God created man in the image of God, then man and God share some attributes. Man's a little bit divine, and God's a little bit human. This means that I am a partner with God in repairing a broken

COMMENTARY

future — from crucifying Jesus, my parents transmitted their sense of relief to me, so I charged up the street, confident that I could roller-skate in peace. To my surprise, the kids up the street still chased and threw rocks at me, yelling "Christ-killer."

A 2,000-year-old myth dies hard.

Since I began teaching Jewish-American literature seven years ago, I've come to realize there is a deeply entrenched pattern of myths among Christians about Judaism. My students
See MYTHS, Page 4E

MYTH 2: Judaism consists of a legalistic code of law.

In "The Merchant of Venice," it becomes evident that the Bard works this myth into his story. At first my students buy into it: "All Shylock cares about is the letter of the law." But later, when the Christians turn the tables on Shylock and make him the defendant, my students start to observe how mercy is relentlessly withheld from the merchant. Not until Shylock denounces his daughter, his dowry, his means of livelihood and finally his very identity (he is forced to convert) do the Christians relent. "No one shows any mercy in this play," one of my students wrote.

My Response: Judaism contains a code of ethical behavior. This code asks, to give just one example, that the farmer leave part of his crop for the widow and the orphan. Whatever the fruits of our labor, we are required to reserve some for the less fortunate. Thus, generosity is not a matter of choice. It's a matter of Jewish law. Better to be generous out of obligation than not to be generous at all.

MYTH 3: The precept of love is omitted from the Hebrew Scripture.

Again and again I have heard from well-meaning Christian students that Jesus brought love into the Old Testament, which somehow left love out.

My Response: The Christian maxim to love thy neighbor is preceded by the Hebrew maxim to "love the stranger as yourself," which is repeated 36 times throughout the Five Books of Moses (see, for instance, Leviticus 19:34.) Many of my students are surprised to learn that this maxim comes from the Old Testament.

MYTH 4: The Hebrew Scripture in itself is incomplete and had to be finished by the New Testament.

Christian students who study the Bible tell me it consists of the Old Testament and the New Testament. The New Testament "corrected" or "completed" the Old Testament, they say.

My Response: That is Christian nomenclature. What Christians call the Old Testament, Jews call the Hebrew Scripture, the Five Books of Moses, the Torah.

The Torah is unified and complete. The commentaries of the rabbis, contained in the later writings known as the Talmud, provide detailed explanations of the Torah. But those writings don't complete the Torah; nor do the Christian Gospels.

MYTH 5: Persecution of Jews began and ended with Nazi Germany.

My response: I wish this myth were true. But it's definitely not. In 1096, Crusaders murdered more than a quarter of the entire Jewish population in the part of Europe now occupied by France and Germany. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council, called by Pope Innocent III, decreed that Jews should wear a "badge of shame." That came centuries before the Nazis' Yellow Star. And, of course, there's been a lot of anti-Semitism since World War II.

OK. So these are the myths. So what? What's the point of trying to budge something immutable as a myth? Even the pope had a hard time doing that.

It seems to me that all normal human beings need to believe they are

reasonable and decent. So even the most hateful individuals distort what they believe to be true, or use what is already distorted, to support their hatred and convince themselves that they are reasonable and decent.

We have to dispel myths that can be used to rationalize hateful acts because rather than throwing rocks at Jewish children, now an American anti-Semite has aimed automatic gunfire at Jewish children.

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