

CULTURE

No, saying that someone ‘Jewed you down’ is not a compliment

There are plenty of excuses for uttering the slur, but none of them are valid

By **Aviya Kushner** October 24, 2022



English actor William Macready in the role of Shylock in Shakespeare's 'The Merchant Of Venice,' circa 1825. Courtesy of Getty Images

It's astonishing to watch a politician reframe a centuries-old antisemitic trope on Jews and money as a compliment.

Michele Reynolds, a Republican running for a seat in Ohio's competitive 3rd Senate District, which includes Columbus, used the phrase "Jew you down" in her self-published 2014 book.

"I learned from other cultures on how they spend their money. Have you ever heard the term 'Jew you down?' This culture has a reputation for not wasting resources," Reynolds wrote.

Whew.

On Thursday, Jake Zuckerman, the Statehouse reporter for Cleveland.com, tweeted that quote, from “The Dreambiz Blueprint: 101 Business Tips on How to Operate Your Dream Business” by Reynolds, whose website identifies her as a third-generation business owner.

An outcry followed, and Reynolds apologized.

But Reynolds’ apology seemed dangerously unaware of the difference between a compliment and an insult rooted in a medieval hatred.

For centuries, Jews were barred from most professions and forced into moneylending. The image of the stingy and usurious Jew has long been a form of hate. But the Reynolds campaign statement showed no acknowledgment of that history, and instead tried to make “Jew you down” into, of all things, a positive — a kind of wisdom.

“A spokeswoman for the campaign said Reynolds used the expression to shed light on ‘what she learned from the wisdom of the Jewish community and how they are reputable for building successful businesses with a foundation of solid money principles,’” Cleveland.com reported.

Wow. And for the record, a slur is not exactly an “expression.”

“Probably no other ethnic group has been vilified with so much linguistic ingenuity as the Jews,” Anatoly Liberman, who writes the Oxford Etymologist blog, observed in 2009. Liberman is the author of “Word Origins And How We Know Them” and “An Analytic Dictionary of English Etymology: An Introduction.”

Politicians defending their use of “Jew you down” have variously insisted that “Jew” is merely a verb, claimed they didn’t know “Jew down” was an insult, and now, said a slur is in fact a nice thing to say, displaying plenty of “linguistic ingenuity” as they defend themselves.

Let’s look at each of those ingenious excuses.

1) It's just a verb

The Oxford English Dictionary has this entry for “Jew” as a verb: “*transitive*. To drive (a person) down in price by haggling; to drive (a price) down by haggling. *offensive*.”

When a prominent dictionary labels a term as “offensive,” it’s offensive — not merely a verb. “Jew” as a “verb” is offensive, just as “gyp” is offensive and dangerous and rooted in ethnic hatred of Roma, who are derisively referred to as “gypsies.”

Europe’s Roma were exterminated at Nazi death camps. “On the basis of the evidence available to date, historians estimate that the Germans and their allies killed between 250,000 and 500,000 European Roma during World War II,” according to the U.S. Holocaust Museum.

For the record, the OED also comments on “the phrasal verb ‘Jew down’”:
“*transitive*. To drive (a person) down in price by haggling; to drive (a price) down by haggling. *offensive*.”

So yes, the phrase is officially “offensive” as well. It’s not just an “expression.”

The American Jewish Committee is blunter. It defines “Jew down” as an “antisemitic term for haggling or bargaining for a cheaper price.”

“Rooted in the false stereotype that Jews are cheap or stingy, the phrase ‘Jew down’ may seem to be a harmless expression that’s used in everyday vernacular,” the AJC writes on its website. “However, it is an insulting, antisemitic misrepresentation of Jewish behavior that plays into the trope of Jews as greedy money handlers who are unwilling to part with their earnings.”

“The common, mainstream use of antisemitic terms, like Jew down, plays a dangerous role in normalizing antisemitism and reinforcing conspiracy theories in the minds of antisemites,” the AJC notes.

2) “I didn’t know it was offensive”

In the past few years, politicians in Indiana, Kentucky and New Jersey have used “Jew down,” claiming they didn’t know it was problematic.

But is “not knowing” an excuse?

In 2019, Stuart Platt, an attorney under contract with the city of Trenton, New Jersey, walked away from a \$25,000 contract with the city because of a prominent local politician’s use of “Jew you down” — and fellow politicians’ use of ignorance as an excuse.

Trenton’s city council president was heard on a recording saying, “I’m sad for her. They were able to wait her out and Jew her down for \$22,000 with pins in her knee that can never ever be repaired.”

“I am an American and I am a Jew. I am resigning because of the disgraceful and shameful antisemitic remarks that were in fact made by the council president of the city of Trenton, Kathy McBride,” Platt wrote. “The vitriolic and hateful antisemitic comments were exacerbated by councilwoman Robin Vaughn, who defended McBride by saying that the word ‘Jew’ is a verb and then claiming not to know this is an antisemitic slur.”

It’s interesting to consider whether “not knowing” would be an acceptable excuse for using other ethnic slurs.

Scholars have become more explicit in their comments, both online and in the press, about just how bad “Jew down” is — and how unseemly the apologies for using it are getting. The “not knowing” excuse doesn’t seem to be flying with them.

Dr. Joanne Freeman, a professor of history at Yale University, called Reynolds’ apology “pathetic” on Twitter.

3) Calling out the slur can be offensive too.

Despite the outcry that usually follows the use of the slur, sometimes those who *do* call out “Jew you down” can get attacked too.

After Representative Casey Weinstein of Ohio called for Reynolds — who is Black — to apologize and drop out of the race, another Ohio Republican framed it as a white man calling for a Black woman to leave politics.

4) But I've been hearing it all my life

In Kentucky, State Rep. Walker Thomas, a Republican, laughed while using it in the state's General Assembly.

He later apologized.

"I sincerely regret using that term and apologize to anyone harmed by my use of it. This is not who I am, nor is it what my faith leads me to be," Thomas said. "It is a phrase I have heard throughout my life, but this experience has provided me with an opportunity to reflect on the impact that words have and the fact that we must be smarter today than we were yesterday."

It's interesting that Representative Walker's thoughtful apology stated that he had heard "Jew you down" all his life. After all, it's likely that Jews have been trying to explain the offensiveness of the term for all their lives too.

One hundred years ago, in a 1922 edition of *The American Israelite*, Rabbi David Philipson, while reviewing H.L. Mencken's "The American Language," took the opportunity to educate his readers about the history and impact of the phrase "Jew down."

"The use of Jew as a verb, in to Jew down, is a slang survival of the medieval term of the opprobrium, and should be avoided altogether," Philipson wrote.

Why this matters

The current outcry over "Jew you down" reflects worry about rising antisemitism — and the lack of penalty for those who make antisemitic comments.

That's disturbingly true for politicians as well as celebrities.

Ye, previously known as Kanye West, has openly bragged about not losing his Adidas contract despite his comments on Jews. "I can literally say antisemitic shit and they cannot drop me," West boasted on a podcast.

And in Los Angeles this weekend, a bridge over the Interstate 405 freeway was covered with signs saying that "Kanye Is Right About the Jews" and "Honk If You Know."

We are in a moment when an antisemitic slur can be excused as merely a verb, a joke, something the speaker did not realize was offensive, a compliment — and even if, like Kanye, the speaker acknowledges that yes, it's antisemitic, there will be no consequences. In fact, you can fly your hatred in a banner from a bridge over a highway.

If anything, what is being haggled down is the cost of public antisemitism.