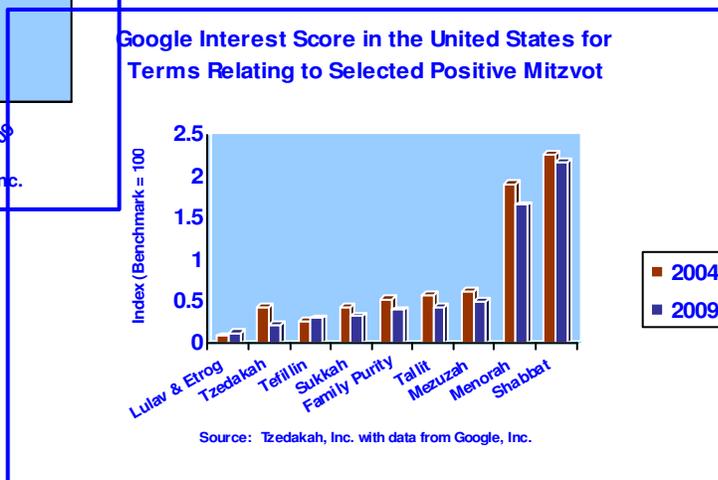
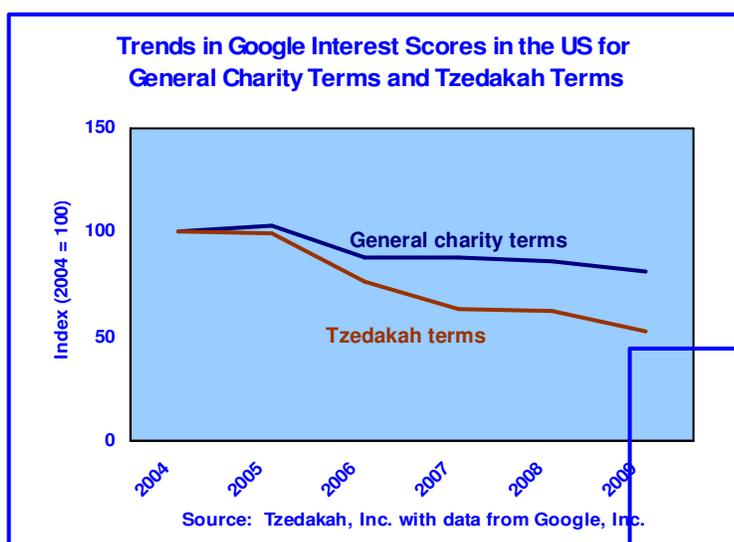


# Searching for Tzedakah

## What Google Reveals about America's Interest in Jewish Charity

Ira Kaminow  
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## **Tzedakah, Inc.**

Tzedakah, Inc. is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to increase the quality of tzedakah. Its website, [www.Tzedakah.Info](http://www.Tzedakah.Info), includes many valuable resources some of which are listed on the last page of this report.

## **Summary**

The internet offers an unprecedented opportunity for donors to learn about Jewish charity and Jewish charities. Widespread use of the internet to research tzedakah would likely shift resources to more effective Jewish charities and provide greater incentive for Jewish charities to deliver needed services effectively.

The research in this report, based on Google search volume data, is discouraging. It finds that there is relatively little interest in using the internet to raise the quality of tzedakah. For example, the volume of searches on “tzedakah” and related query terms is low and declining rapidly relative to searches on other mitzvot and relative to searches on general charity terms. The research also finds that interest in tzedakah around traditional Jewish seasons for giving is swamped by the volume of searches in December as interest in tax avoidance soars.

The low level of tzedakah internet searches may reflect a broader disinterest in the quality of tzedakah. And such disinterest would permit many Jewish charities to avoid transparency which further discourages donors from looking for it.

## I. Introduction

The internet can be a very powerful tool to make donors better informed and charities more transparent. Ideally, donors should use the internet to search out effective charities that meet their giving objectives much as consumers use the internet to search for the right car or refrigerator. And donors should urge charities to provide the necessary transparency online to allow them to make smarter giving decisions.

The web also has the potential to educate donors about ways to evaluate tzedakah organizations and to establish priorities in giving, and about Jewish attitudes toward issues like tithing, what counts as tzedakah, and the donor's right and obligation to investigate solicitors.

A better informed donor base is likely to seek out effective tzedakot and to give charities the incentive to improve management of their limited resources. Despite the internet's historic potential for enhancing the quality of tzedakah, however, data on the volume of Google searches -- which are analyzed in this study -- indicate that donors to Jewish charities could be using the internet much more frequently and effectively.

## II. Google Insights for Search

Google Insights for Search<sup>1</sup>, a free service of Google, Inc, gives anyone with a computer access to information on the frequency of searches for popular query terms. It's an effective way to learn what people care enough about to Google.

Analysis of internet search volume has proved its worth in fascinating ways. In the first application of Google Insights data, analysts from Google, Inc. and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed that the volume of Google queries relating to the flu gives an early warning of the spread of flu-like symptoms in the population<sup>2</sup>. Other research has

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<sup>1</sup> [www.google.com/insights/search/#](http://www.google.com/insights/search/#)

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Ginsberg et. al. "Detecting Influenza epidemics using search engine query data" *Nature* 19 February 2009;  
<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v457/n7232/full/nature07634.html>

shown that the popularity of specified search terms can help economists make better predictions of unemployment, housing sales, housing prices, and consumer spending. The new methodology has been successfully applied in Israel, Italy, and Germany as well as in the US. There can be little doubt that Google Insights and similar resources will eventually become a valuable complement to more traditional methods of learning what people are thinking.

### **III. Pros and cons of internet search data**

Analysis of the volume of internet search terms has a number of advantages over more traditional methods of opinion research like polling. (1) The data are free to users. (2) They are available almost immediately. (3) They cover virtually any area one might find of interest. (4) There is no danger of response bias – the shading of responses to impress the interviewer, to hide embarrassing or unpopular views, or for similar reasons.

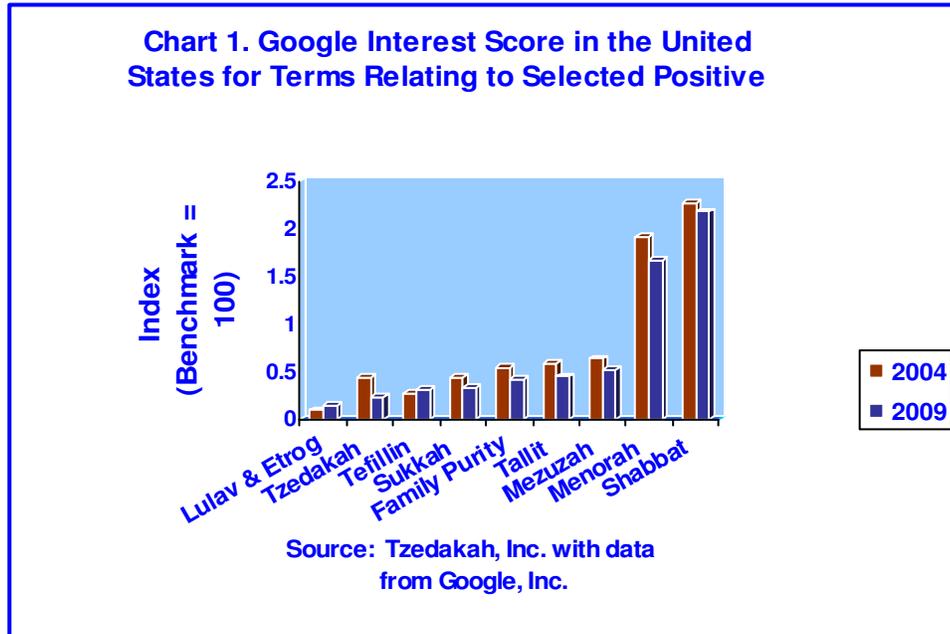
On the other hand, Google Insights has a number of drawbacks. (1) Researchers have no idea of the motive behind searches. To what extent do searches on “anti-Semitism” reflect Jewish interest in the threat as opposed, for example, to anti-Semites searching for like-minded bigots? (2) Google Insights is not based on a random sample – it gives greater weight to those who rely more heavily on web surfing for information. (3) There is a danger of counting searches on unintended terms. For example, care needs to be taken to exclude searches on “tzedakah boxes” from the count when trying to learn about interest in tzedakah. Alternatively, there is the possibility of inadvertently excluding from the count variants of words that searchers might use. How much interest is there in maot chittim (the practice of giving tzedakah prior to Passover)? The analysis must be careful to include in the count all variant spellings (especially important in transliterations from Hebrew), and the Aramaic form “kimcha d’pische”. Google Insights allows for several variants of each word or concept to be included in the search counts and for others to be excluded.

#### IV. Tzedakah is among the least searched of positive commandments.

In 2009, tzedakah was the least frequently searched of the mitzvot in chart 1 except for lulav and etrog (see the box on the next page for tips on reading the charts). Maimonides writes in his *Mishneh Torah*, (“Gifts of the Poor” 10:1) that Jews are obliged to perform the mitzvah of tzedakah with more care than any other positive commandment. But, if Google search frequency is any indication of the care devoted to the performance of various mitzvot, charity is near the bottom.

Search interest for tzedakah is not only low, but it dropped more between 2004 and 2009 than did interest in the other mitzvot in the chart. Did that decline reflect falling Google search interest in charity in general? Not so much.

#### DESPITE MAIMONIDES' INJUNCTION, TZEDAKAH IS AMONG THE LEAST SEARCHED MITZVOT ON THE INTERNET



### Things to Keep in Mind When Reading the Charts

**Google interest scores.** Charts 1, 7, and 8 show Google interest scores. These are measures of the frequency of searches for particular query terms *relative to the total number of Google searches in the place and at the time of the count* (for example, the United States in 2004). For a more detailed description of Google interest scores, see [www.google.com/support/insights/bin/topic.py?topic=13975](http://www.google.com/support/insights/bin/topic.py?topic=13975).

**Google interest scores, benchmark.** In this paper, scores for Google interest terms in charts 1, 7, and 8 are given relative to a benchmark: the score for the word “Jewish” in the year 2004. A Google interest score of 2 means the subject term had a score of 2% of the score reached by “Jewish” in 2004. Scaling Google interest scores to searches on “Jewish” in 2004 allows comparisons across charts. For example, chart 1 shows that “Shabbat” received a score of 2.2. Chart 7 shows that “Chabad” had a score of about 3. That is, “Chabad” had a score about one-third higher than “Shabbat”.

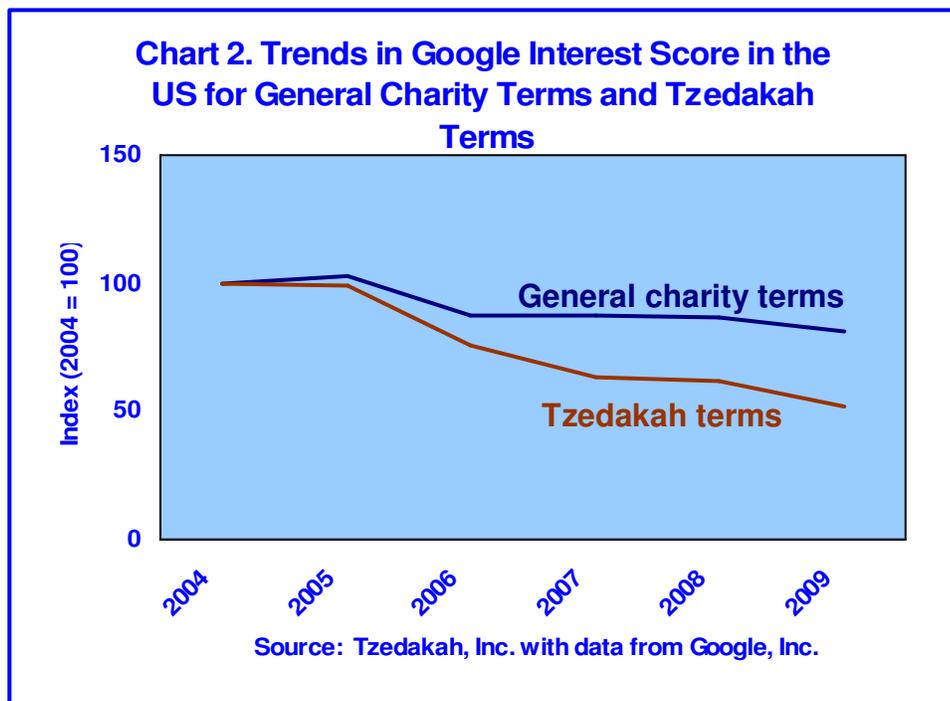
**Seasonal patterns.** Charts 5 and 6 show seasonal patterns. Seasonal patterns reveal when, during a typical year, searches on particular words tend to hit peaks and valleys. In the charts, the average frequency of searches for a given query term over the course of the year is set at 100. If there were no seasonal variation, the seasonal pattern graph would appear as a straight line drawn at 100. Charts 5 and 6 divide the year into 13 four-week periods because scores are typically provided by Google at a weekly – not monthly -- frequency.

The estimated seasonal variation is represented by the deviation of each four-week period's value from 100. Numbers less than a 100 indicate lower scores in that period; numbers greater than 100 indicate an above-average score. For example, the seasonal value for general charity terms gets a score of 126 for the final four weeks of the year. That means that over the six years, Google searches were 26% higher, on average, in the last four weeks of each year than during the average four-week period for the year as a whole. (Seasonal variations were estimated using a regression with a linear time trend and 12 dummy variables.)

## V. Interest in tzedakah tanked relative to interest in charity in general

Chart 2 shows the plunge in Google users' interest in Jewish charity query terms compared with charity terms in general. Whereas the Google interest score for general charity terms fell by 20% between 2004 and 2009, the score for tzedakah and other Jewish charity terms fell by a stunning 50%! By 2009, search interest in Jewish charity terms was six-tenths of a percent as high as search interest in charity in general – only about a third of the Jewish share of the US population.

**SEARCHES ON TZEDAKAH-RELATED WORDS PLUMETTED  
RELATIVE TO GENERAL CHARITY TERMS**

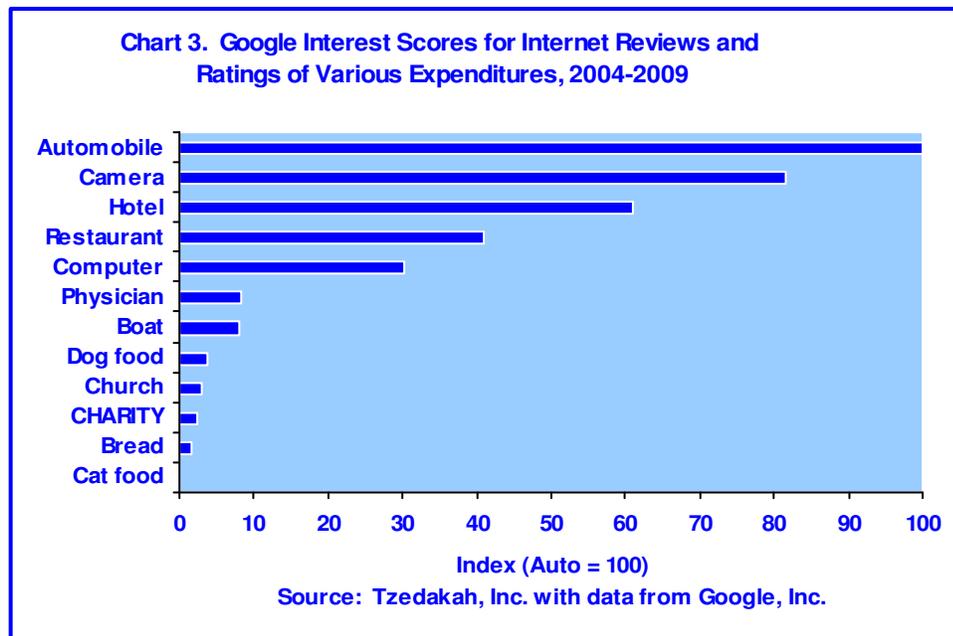


## V. How much do Americans use the web to evaluate charities?

Tzedakah, Inc.'s mission includes fostering better informed giving. That motivated the question: Do Google users seek out ratings and reviews of Jewish charities as they do for goods and services? Applying Google Insights for Search to terms like tzedakah reviews or Jewish charity ratings turned up nothing. That's because the number of searches on those terms was below Google's threshold for recording interest scores.

What about charities in general? Chart 3 provides some answers. Taking searches on “automobile reviews” and “automobile ratings” as equal to 100, phrases like “charity reviews” and “charity ratings” received a Google interest score of just 2.4. It is not at all surprising, that consumers are more careful about the features, quality, and value of products and services they buy than of the charities to which they donate. But it is disturbing that there is greater Google search interest in dog food than charities...at least charity scores rank above cat food scores.

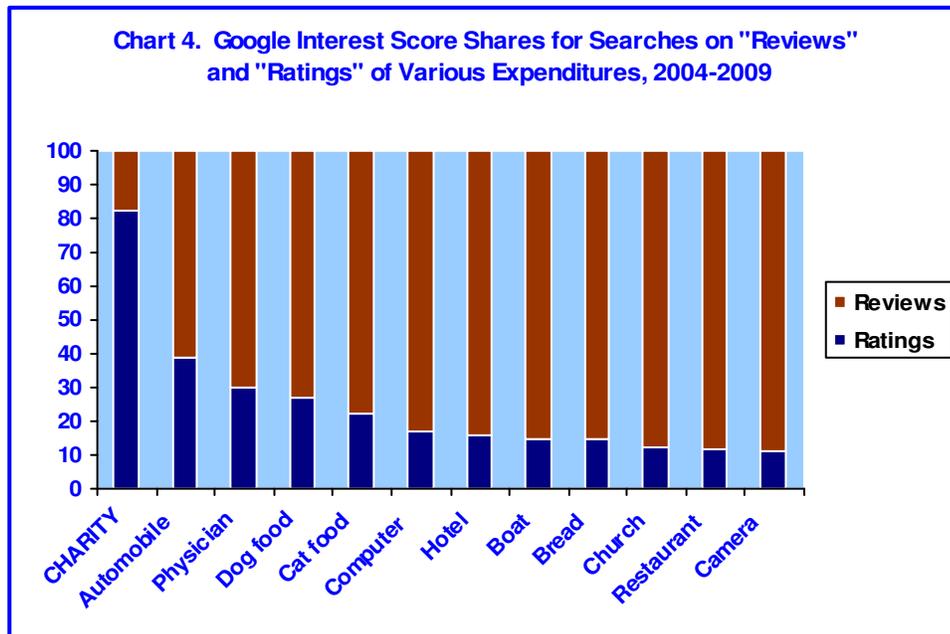
**AMERICANS USE THE INTERNET FAR MORE TO LEARN ABOUT THE PRODUCTS AND SERVICES THEY BUY THAN THE CHARITIES TO WHICH THEY DONATE**



Another way to dig into interest in the quality of charities is to split the data between searches for ratings and reviews. Reviews, (narrative descriptions of products, their quality, and their pros and cons) allow readers to thoughtfully make decisions based on their own values and preferences. Ratings (typically number or letter “grades” given to products, services, and charities) are easy to read but do not provide in-depth information. They do not allow for nuanced decisionmaking or for individual differences in perceptions of the most important selection criteria.

Chart 4 shows that there are four searches on charity *ratings* for every search on more informative charity *reviews*. By contrast, for all products and services that were investigated, searches on *reviews* were more frequent than searches on simple *ratings*.

**GOOGLE SEARCHERS LOOK FOR SIMPLE CHARITY RATINGS  
RATHER THAN MORE INFORMATIVE REVIEWS**

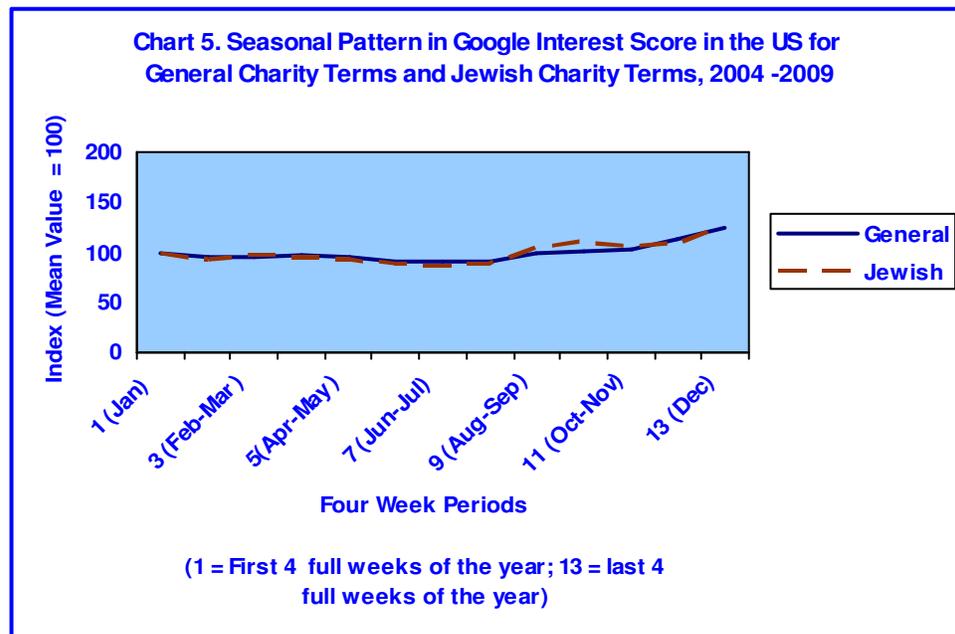


**VI. Seasonal patterns:**

Chart 5 (next page) shows the seasonal patterns for searches on words related to charity in general (solid blue line) and words related to Jewish charity (broken red line) over the period 2004-2009. (See the box on page 4 for a discussion of how to read charts showing seasonal variation.)

**December peak.** For the most part, seasonal variation in searches for Jewish charity terms parallel those for general charity searches. Both have relatively mild seasonal patterns and both peak at the end of the year, reflecting, no-doubt, year-end tax avoiding strategies. For Jewish and general charity search terms, Google interest scores at year-end are virtually identical at about 25% above annual averages. That is surprising because, unlike tzedakah, December queries on general charity terms are probably motivated both by tax considerations and Christmas giving.

### SEARCHES ON JEWISH CHARITY TERMS JUMP AT HIGH HOLIDAY TIME, BUT ARE HIGHEST AT YEAR END



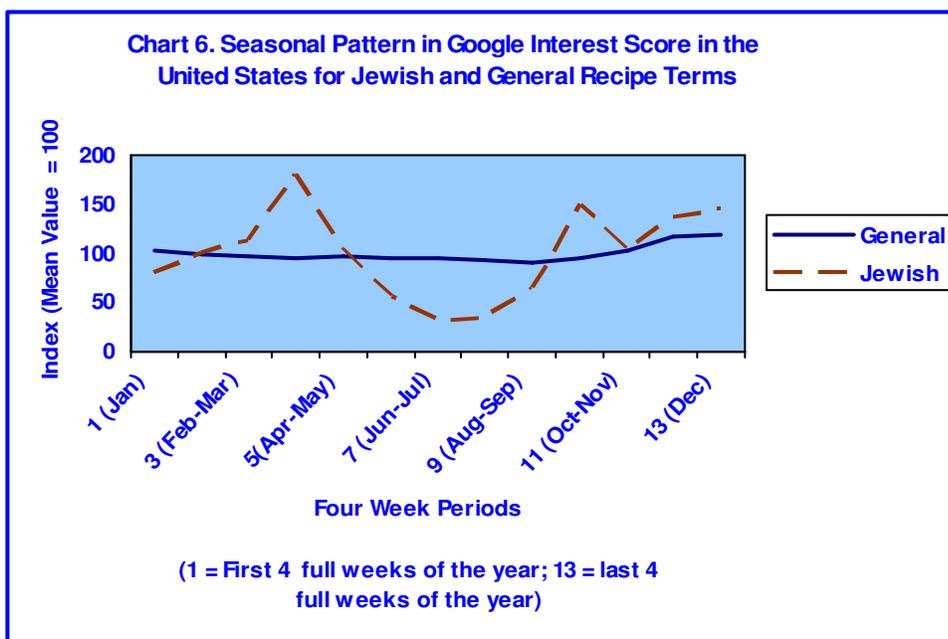
**The High Holiday bump: Not nearly as strong as the December peak.** The principal difference between the seasonality of interest in general charity terms and Jewish charity terms is the bulge in search activity on the latter around the High Holidays. However, search interest in tzedakah and other Jewish charity terms in the September-October period is only 11% above the annual average as compared with 25% above average at the end of the year. Tax avoidance motives in December seem to trump the desire to avert the evil decree around Yom Kippur.

**Ignoring tradition? Flat-lining in the spring.** Jewish tradition encourages special giving in the spring through the mitzvah of matanot l'evyonim (gifts for the poor) on Purim and the custom of maot chittim (money for holiday needs) before Passover. Despite tradition's emphasis on Purim and Passover giving, there is virtually no increase in interest in Jewish charity terms in the spring.

It is interesting to compare the seasonal pattern in searches on tzedakah with the seasonal pattern for Jewish and kosher recipes. Unlike the mild

influence of the holiday cycle on interest in tzedakah, the holidays play a powerful role in the timing of interest in Jewish and kosher recipes (chart 6). Interest around Passover is 80% higher than for the average during the year and interest around the High Holidays and Chanukah is 50% above average. Compare those figures with the lack of any bounce in interest in tzedakah around Passover and just an 11% boost around the High Holidays. Holidays apparently have a far greater influence on interest in food than on interest in tzedakah.

**UNLIKE TZEDAKAH, SEARCH INTEREST IN JEWISH AND KOSHER RECIPES SOAR AROUND PASSOVER AND THE HIGH HOLIDAYS**



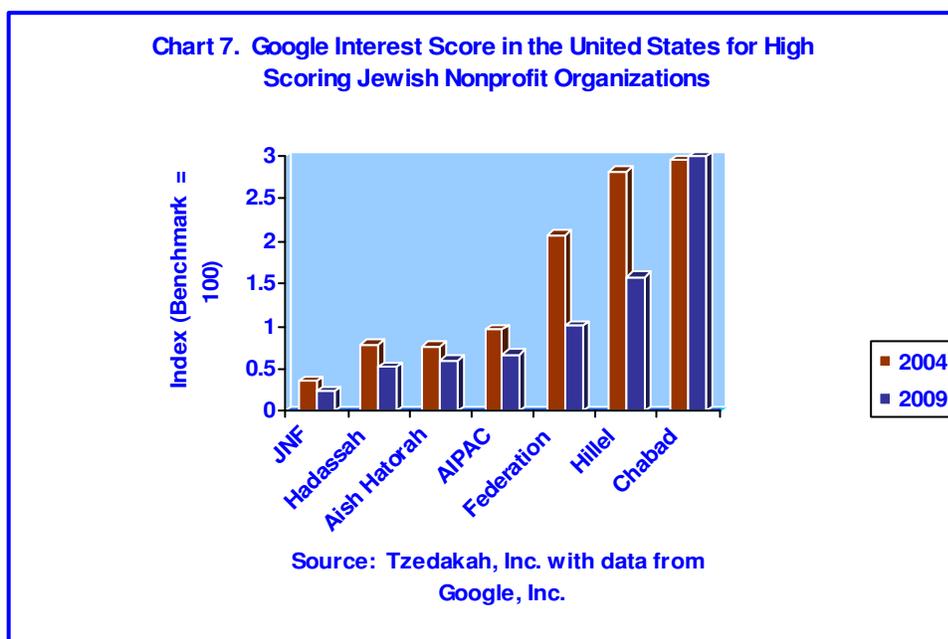
**VII. Individual charities**

**Frequently searched charities.** Chabad appears to be the Jewish charity most frequently searched on Google in the United States.<sup>3</sup> In 2009, “Chabad” and “Lubavitch” were searched nearly twice as often as Hillel

<sup>3</sup> Checking the search popularity of organizations is particularly difficult. Many are known by initials that also represent other search terms (Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and “activities of daily living”, American Jewish Committee (AJC) and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Orthodox Union (OU) and any of a number of universities.) Hillel and Hadassah required special care to exclude other organizations and individuals who share those names, including the two heroes who original answered to them.

which had the next highest score (chart 7). Hillel did score close to Chabad in 2004, but its search interest score fell dramatically by 2009. Chabad search terms are among the few Jewish-related query terms whose Google interest score did not drop from 2004 to 2009. The heavy interest in Chabad is consistent with another finding (not shown in this paper). Chasidism was the most frequently searched of Jewish religious streams (Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionism) in the 2004-2009 period.

**CHABAD WAS THE MOST FREQUENTLY SEARCHED ORGANIZATION OF THOSE INVESTIGATED AND THE ONLY ONE WHOSE SEARCH POPULARITY DID NOT DROP**

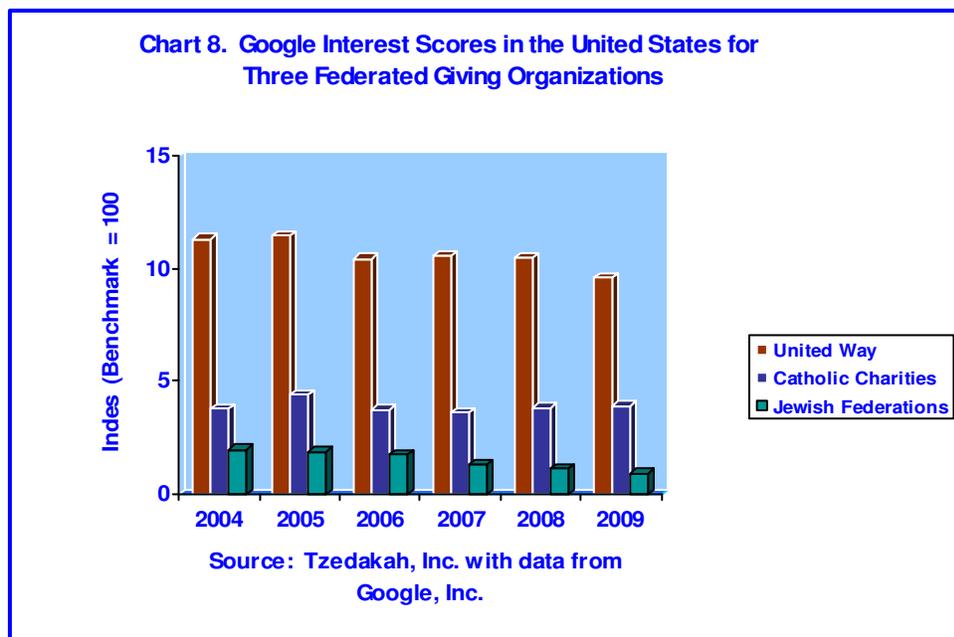


**Jewish Federations, United Way, and Catholic Charities.** It might be interesting to compare search interest in individual Jewish charities with non-Jewish counterparts. Unfortunately, it's difficult to match Jewish and non-Jewish charities because of the multitude of variables and external conditions that characterize each organization. There may be, however, one exception: federated giving organizations like Jewish Federations, United Way, and Catholic Charities.

Search interest in Jewish Federations was surprisingly high. In 2004, federations earned a Google interest score almost 20% as high as the score

for United Way and more than half the score for Catholic Charities (chart 8). Those ratios are far higher than Jews' share in the US population. However, search interest in Jewish federations fell much more rapidly than interest in the other federated giving organizations between 2004 and 2009.

**GOOGLE INTEREST SCORES FOR JEWISH FEDERATION  
TERMS ARE VERY HIGH RELATIVE TO JEWS' TINY SHARE  
OF THE US POPULATION.**



### VIII. Concluding remarks

We can only speculate about why Google interest scores for tzedakah are so low and declining so fast. People may be getting their tzedakah information from other sources. If so, that leaves open the question: Why does the web seem so much more popular for other mitzvot and for charity in general than for tzedakah?

Another possibility is that the lack of interest in Jewish charity query terms reflects a general unwillingness by donors to spend time and effort on the internet or elsewhere to perform the mitzvah of tzedakah carefully. Or it may reflect disappointment with the quality of tzedakah resources on the net -- especially in regard to the information charities reveal about themselves. Perhaps it is a mutually reinforcing combination of lack of

interest and lack of useful resources. Donors don't search in part because many lack interest but also because there is little to find. For their part, most charities leave much to be desired with regard to transparency – perhaps because donors don't seem to care.

Whatever the reason, data from Google Insights for Search strongly indicate that tzedakah donors are massively underutilizing the power of the internet. That is particularly distressing because Judaism has a long tradition of urging donors to be generous *and careful* about their giving and to assure that the organizations to which they donate are effective. Maimonides' view, mentioned on page 3, is one manifestation of that tradition. Rav Moshe Feinstein in *Igros Moshe* (Yoreh Deah 149) provides a more recent statement:

according to all opinions, it is necessary that [the tzedakah administrator] is trustworthy, righteous, and knows how to conduct [the fund] properly. And though it is inappropriate to prohibit giving a gift to whomever one pleases, [such a contribution] is not considered tzedakah and also [the donor] cannot use tithing funds.

When donors give with care and check out charities before they give, it helps assure that funds will flow to the most effective organizations. And with more sunshine directed at charities, they will likely be more careful with the resources under their stewardship. For suggestions about what donors should look for, see *Smart Tzedakah: How to Evaluate Charities before You Give* available as a free download from [www.Tzedakah.Info](http://www.Tzedakah.Info). Our site also includes detailed profiles of organizations that have earned Tzedakah, Inc.'s "Highest Rating for Transparency" seal.

## Resources Available at [www.Tzedakah.Info](http://www.Tzedakah.Info)

*Ask the Rabbi.* Email your questions about tzedakah and tithing to Rabbi Raphael Avraham Cohen author of *Preserve Your Assets: The Laws of Tzedaka and Related Issues*.

*Be Pure Before God and Israel: Principles of Ethics, Governance, and Accountability for Jewish Philanthropies in the United States.* Prepared by Tzedakah, Inc. in partnership with the Orthodox Caucus. (Available as a free download from our website or for purchase in hard copy format.)

*Don't Delay 'til December: The Tzedakah Calendar.* Identifies the traditional days to make an extra effort to give tzedakah. (Available as a free download or as a refrigerator magnet. Schools and synagogues may order limited quantities on card stock for distribution at no charge.)

*Raise Your Standard of Giving: Practical Tzedakah Guidelines Drawn from Jewish Tradition* A lecture by Rabbi Yitzchok Breitowitz (Available online free, and for purchase in CD and DVD formats. The DVD is available free to schools and synagogues.)

*Smart Tzedakah: How to Evaluate Charities before You Give* (Available as a free download or for purchase in hard copy format.)