

## Some Thought on Choosing a Hebrew Name

by Eileen S. Sklaroff

Would a *Raizel* by any other name smell as sweet? What if she were a *Varda* or a *Shoshana* or a *Vered* – all Hebrew equivalents of the Yiddish, *Raizel*, all meaning *rose*. What's in a name - a lot, potentially, if we are talking about a *shem kodesh*, sacred or Hebrew name.

One of my earliest Jewish memories is of my grandmother telling me about her mother, Essie, the person for whom I was named. Essie and seven of her 11 children immigrated to the United States in 1906 in the steerage compartment of a ship. Many years later, I discovered that she had actually entered this country as *Hessia*, the Russian version of Esther, from the Persian, meaning *star*. But she was known by the diminutive form of her Yiddish name, and that, in turn, became the source from which my names, both secular and sacred derived. So strong was my feeling of connection to this woman that when it came time to name my own children, the process was clear.

Not so for all parents, I have learned, during seven years spent fielding phone calls for my husband, a *mohel*. Many expectant parents have not given thought to a Hebrew name. So my self-defined role, in the continuing reality series, *Married to the Mohel*, is to present options, empowering parents to make one of the first important decisions in their child's Jewish life.

Following are some of the questions frequently asked of me, and answers that provide direction for parents beginning the search.

### **Why does my child need a Hebrew name?**

Hebrew names are used exclusively for certain lifecycle events, religious rituals, specific prayers, and legal documents. Examples include: bar or bat mitzvah, an *aliyah* to the Torah, memorial prayers and *ketubbot*, marriage contracts.

### **When do I need to pick this name?**

A baby boy is named at his *bris*. A baby girl receives her Hebrew name at a special ceremony called a *Simchat Bat* or in synagogue during the Torah service.

### **Where do I begin?**

Judaism is a religion bound by laws. Amazingly, none pertain to the naming of a child. So we look to *minhag*, custom or tradition, for guidance. Jews of Ashkenazic background generally name a child after a deceased relative. Sephardim consider it auspicious for longevity to name after living grandparents and even for a father to name after himself. And modern Israelis may choose a name relating to nature, a holiday or a commemorative event.

### **Do the English and Hebrew names have to match?**

Not necessarily, although it makes sense to call a girl named Rebecca, *Rivkah*. Parents often choose English names that have no relationship to the Hebrew names of their child. Or they may opt to match the sound of the first letter of the English name with the sound of the first letter of the Hebrew name, e.g. Robert, from the Anglo-Saxon, meaning *bright, wise counsel* with *Reuven*, from the Hebrew, meaning, *Behold, a son!*

### **Can I name after one set of people in English and another in Hebrew?**

Yes, this is perfectly acceptable.

### **Can I name a male child after a female and vice versa?**

When naming a male child after a female, one should try to use as many of the same letters and vowels as possible or to find a male equivalent with the same meaning. For example, there is no male equivalent for the female name *Rachel*, but parents might consider *Rachmiel*, from the Hebrew, meaning *compassion of the Lord*. The Hebrew letters *resh*, *chet*, *lamed*, which spell *Rachel*, are contained in the name *Rachmiel*. But a male named after a *Yehudit*, Judith, logically would be called *Yehuda*, Judah, female and male counterparts, meaning *praise*.

### **No one in my family knows the Hebrew/Yiddish name of my grandfather. What can I do?**

When you have exhausted the memories of the oldest living relatives, you might try to find the person's *ketubbah*, check burial records or, if possible, visit the grave and take a rubbing of the stone. If all else fails, you can always find a Hebrew name that sounds like or means the same thing as the English name of the relative.

### **I don't like the sound of my grandmother's Yiddish name. Do I have to use it?**

You do not have to use the exact name unless changing it will cause an uproar in your family. If that could occur, you may want to weigh your choice against *shalom bayit*, peace in the household. An alternative might be to use the name in its original form as a middle name.

So *Essie* served me well until I entered religious school and decided that I needed to modernize my name. Israeli teachers offered a variety of suggestions, but I rejected them all. After a few years of reinventing myself each September, I settled on *Hadassah*, Hebrew for *Esther*, also meaning, *myrtle tree*, the symbol of victory. What's in a name? Who can predict the potential of creativity?

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*Eileen S. Sklaroff named her children Shimshon Leibel Moshe and Eliyahu David. When she is not juggling phone calls for her husband, Cantor Mark Kushner, she runs the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society, a 187-year-old organization that assists Jewish women in financial crisis.*

## **BOOKS CAN HELP**

While the Internet provides adequate information on many subjects, Hebrew names is not one of them. I prefer to rely on the nine books I keep close at hand, for correct spellings in Hebrew, English transliteration, meanings and variations on the same theme. A few of my favorites are:

### ***The Complete Dictionary of English and Hebrew First Names***

by Rabbi Alfred J. Kolatch or any of the paperback spin-offs, all published by Jonathan David. At the back of the book is a name vocabulary with an alphabetical list of meanings and the masculine and feminine names that relate to them as well as a detailed bibliography.

### ***Jewish Personal Names:***

#### ***Their Origin, Derivation and Diminutive Forms***

by Rabbi Shmuel Gorr, published by Avotaynu, Inc. This book starts with a root name and gives a brief translation and explanation. Then it lists derivative names, both Yiddish and Hebrew. The index at the back provides a quick reference for the derivatives, many of which are quite esoteric.

### ***Your Name Is Your Blessing***

by Rabbi Benjamin Blech and Elaine Blech, Rowman & Littlefield. Using a different approach to naming, this book employs *Gematria* and mystical meanings to help parents arrive at the *right* name for their child.