

Children's Names as a Reflection of Ideological Differences among Israeli Parents

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Abstract

In the early days of Israel, Hebrew names replaced foreign ones, and new names appeared, especially for girls. At first, many names expressed the ideology of the new State, but later names expressed more individualistic and materialistic values. Oriental Jews immigrating to the country since the 1950s adopted the prevailing fashion in names. The religious segment of the population did not change at all or changed in a more limited way than the general population. A comparative study of two groups of schoolchildren and their parents, one modern and one traditional, shows the impact of ideology on naming children.

Ideological Change and its Impact on the Naming of Children

Since ancient times Jewish parents have had fixed ways of naming their newborn children. There were differences among the various ethnic groups living in separate communities. Thus for example some groups used to give their children names of living grandparents and, in the case of the Yemenite Jews, even of living parents, while other groups refrained from this usage and named children exclusively for deceased relatives (Kaganoff 98–99; Laredo 32; Stahl, *Sources* 3: 133, 144–48). But within a single group customs were stable and people rarely deviated from them. Each community had a traditional stock of names for boys and girls, which were passed on from generation to generation. A large part of this stock of names was common to Jews everywhere, especially for males, for example, names from the Old Testament and the names of famous Rabbis in the Talmud. To these each community added the names of famous local Rabbis and of ordinary people, parents, and grandparents, whose names were given to their descendants. Not a few of these names were non-Hebrew, but in time came to be regarded as Jewish, such as the Ashkenazi (European Jewish) name *Kalman*, originally the Greek name *Kalonymus* (meaning “good name”); or the North-African Jewish name *Mas’ud*,

meaning "fortunate." As for female names, the situation was radically different. The Old Testament has 1,711 names, only 99 of which are of women (Rozen 77). Some of these names are borne by non-Jewish persons, such as Persian or Babylonian kings, and some by negative characters, such as Cain, Haman and his wife Zeresh, and Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Subtracting these and the many Biblical names which had never been used by Jews, enough remained for boys, but not so for girls.

Now for boys parents preferred an Hebrew or at least a traditionally ethnic Jewish name: men participated in various religious rites, and their names were called out in the synagogue when it was their turn to recite (or have someone recite on their behalf) a portion of the Torah (Pentateuch). But the girl's name was only for use at home, by her family and friends. Thus in many cases parents used non-Jewish names, taken from the people among whom they happened to live. A great many of these names can still be found in the telephone directories of Israel, as noticed by Edwin Lawson in a recent article in this journal. Examples include West European *Victoria* and *Mathilde*, North-African and Middle Eastern *Sima*, Italian *Regina*, German-Yiddish *Liebe* and *Bluma*, and Russian *Olga*. As we shall see, these names are now borne mostly by middle-aged or elderly Israeli women or by recent immigrants, and are rarely found among children. Because of the lack of female names many more new names were created for girls. In a list published by the lexicographer Abraham Even-Shoshan in 1969 there are about 2,500 male names, the majority taken from written texts, and about 1,200 female names, almost all of which are new formations of the last decades. Since then the number of names for girls has been considerably augmented (see Sidi-Shir). A comparatively new development is the use of the same names for both genders: girls use names with a masculine form, like Shiran or Rothem, but boys do not use names with feminine endings in -ah or -ith.

The Zionist movement, which started at the end of the nineteenth century, changed the course of Jewish history by causing a large part of the people to leave the countries of the diaspora and to immigrate to Israel. Among many changes this brought in all spheres of life were the names people gave to children of both sexes, but especially those they gave to the girls. As the immigrants started to use Hebrew as their everyday means of communication, it was of course inconceivable that they would continue to give their children names in what had now become foreign languages. A hundred years before, parents had already started the process of enlarging the existing inventory of names. This was done by translating: Judeo-Spanish *Rema* 'queen' became Hebrew *Malka*; Yiddish *Shayne* 'beautiful' turned into *Yaffa*. Other ways were ransacking the Old Testament for

names of sympathetic people (and even some "border cases") which had never gained currency among Jews: *Ya'el*, *Hagar*, *Nimrod*, *Gideon*, *Mikhal*; and coining entirely new names, especially for girls, as the available list was quite short. Many of these names were of qualities, such as the male names *Or* 'light,' *Amits* 'valiant,' and *Kfir* 'lion'; or the female names *Alizah* 'joyful,' *Nawah* 'beautiful,' and *Zehava* 'golden.'

People believing in the Zionist ideology, involved in settling the land of Israel and building the future of the Jewish people, often chose symbolic names for their children which expressed their ideals and their hopes. Some examples are the boys' names *Eitan* 'strong,' *Solel* 'paving the road,' and *Yavniel* 'God will build'; and the girls' names *Geulah* 'redemption,' *Atidah* 'future,' and *Tkhiyah* 'rebirth.' Many names were made up of roots with the meanings of settling the country, volunteering on behalf of the people, being strong in order to build the land of Israel in the face of all obstacles, and achieving freedom and peace. Others were connected with the plants and animals of the old-new country: *Alon* 'oak,' *Raqefeth* 'cyclamen,' *Ofer* and *Ofrah* 'young deer,' in male and female form (Alon 22-30). Some called their children after important Zionist leaders, such as *Herzl*, or its female equivalent, *Herzliyah*.

As the generation of builders gradually passed away, ideological fervor subsided. The State was finally founded, the heroic period was finished. People became more individualistic, and this new spirit found expression in children's names. Parents tried to be original, to find or invent newer and more unusual names. The idea was to be unique. In some Kibbutsim young people would become very annoyed if some other couple would "rob" the name they had given their child by using the same name. Some parents-to-be would announce beforehand the names they planned to give their baby so that no one would snatch it away. At the same time another phenomenon was observed, in line with the spirit of the time, which had moved from idealism to materialism: a spate of names with the element *li* 'me' or 'mine.' Some examples: *Lior* and *Orli* 'my light,' *Lihi* 'she is mine,' and *Sheli* 'mine.' Other names referred to wealth or material objects: *Shai*, *Matan*, and *Doron*, 'gift'; *Adi* 'jewel'; *Idit* 'the best'; and *Shefa* 'abundance' (Alon 41).

Immigration, Cultural Change and Naming Problems

In the meantime, the ethnic composition of the Jewish population had undergone a radical change. Until about 1950 it had been predominantly Eastern European. This changed slowly to a situation in which half of the population and two-thirds of the children had originated from the

countries of North Africa and the Middle East. These people of course had their own naming patterns, as mentioned before.

But from the time that they immigrated to Israel to the present, during a period of about forty years, they have undergone an accelerated process of cultural change, which has totally transformed their ways of life (Stahl, *Second Generation*). This included the adoption, both by imposition and by free choice, of the names common to the culturally and politically dominant groups in Israeli society, the Ashkenazis. In many cases people occupying official positions, bureaucrats, teachers, and nurses simply changed the names of the immigrants and their children. Sometimes this was done by accident, through a misunderstanding; sometimes for "their own good," so that they would have a Hebrew name, which ideologically was considered the right thing to do.

In time, with ongoing modernization, young Oriental parents came to look about for modern "Israeli" names, and copied the names their young Ashkenazi neighbors chose for their children. The special ethnic names in Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Spanish, and other Jewish languages have disappeared, like the Yiddish names among the Ashkenazis. Even the Hebrew names which were common among the Oriental communities are not much in use anymore: names such as *Mazal* 'luck' and *Levana* 'white' for girls or *Uaviv* 'sympathetic' and *Nissim* 'miracles' for boys. As we shall see, by now there is no observable difference between the naming patterns of Ashkenazis and Orientals, although differences may be found by in-depth interviews with parents. The changes described were not easy, neither for the Europeans who started the whole process three to four generations ago nor for the Orientals who have joined them since the 1950s. One does not deviate from age-old customs without challenge. There were enthusiastic voices of intellectuals and Zionist leaders in favor of the change, of liberation from the shackles of the diaspora and renewal of the life of the people, the change which was symbolized by the new names (Rozen 79–84; the same discussions took place in connection with the adoption of Hebrew family names: see Stahl, *Jewish Family Names* 71–74). But other voices were less favorable. The poet Abraham Shlonsky (died 1973) pointed out that the trend to create an ever-increasing number of new names caused the Jewish people to break with the historical past, to sever themselves from their roots. In rejecting the names of Abraham and Sarah, the young people in fact rejected their Jewish heritage (Shlonsky 216–218). This view is supported by the observations of two social scientists on the naming practices of young parents in a Kibbutz (Abramovitch and Bilu 14–15). In many cases, grandparents and parents who had been brought up in a tradition which considered names as one of the most meaningful

ties that bound the generations were totally opposed to the new fashions in names. For them a child which bore the name of a deceased relative was in some way his physical equivalent. In some communities parents used to address their children who had the names of their parents with the expression "My Father" or "My Mother" (Stahl, *Sources* 3: 144–46). Many bitter quarrels ensued between the elder generation and their children when they suddenly realized that the old customs would not be continued any longer, and that grandparents could not count on their names being passed on to the following generations as had been the custom in the past.

Some of the problems of name giving among Oriental Jews in a state of cultural change have been described by investigators who worked among Moroccans in Israel and Iraqis in Australia (Abramovitch and Bilu; Samra). I shall add some random examples, most of them collected during a seminar on the Jewish- Oriental family I gave at the Hebrew University in 1991. The examples relate to typical situations over the last two decades among Ashkenazi, Oriental, and mixed Jewish families in Israel. They clearly show the intergenerational clash of values and the sometimes ingenious ways people find to solve problems and eliminate stress in the family. Some of the examples also show that the wish for change, modernity, and breaking with tradition has not always been completely interiorized, and that many individuals, trying to be modern, do not have an easy time of it.

One way out of the problem of refusing to give the children a foreign or unfashionable name is by translating it, or finding a name which has some identical phonetic element. Thus a Tunisian family translated their grandmother's name *Mziana* into *Yaffa*, as both mean "beautiful." A generation later female names ending in *-a* had become passé, so the name was given the form of *Yafit*, still retaining the same meaning. In an Oriental family the grandmother died ten days before the birth of a granddaughter. To the elder generation it would have been inconceivable not to give the woman's name to the new-born. But her name was *Sara*, and it was equally inconceivable to the young parents to give their daughter such a name, now found only among either the elderly and old or the ultra-orthodox. After much thought the mother came up with a solution: as the daughter had been born ten days after the decease of the grandmother, she proposed adding the letter *I*, which in Hebrew has the numerical value of ten, to the name *Sara*; this would give the name *Shira*, which had some letters and part of the sounds of *Sara*, and was a perfectly modern name (its meaning is "song"). This idea left everybody content. An equally complicated way of reasoning helped in a mixed Hungarian-Moroccan family: the grandfather was called *Moshe* (Moses). For reasons already stated it was simply impossible to use such an old-fashioned name for the brand-new

baby born to his daughter some time afterwards. But in honor of her father, and not less of her still-living mother, a way out was found: it is said of Moses that “the skin of his face shone” (Exod. 34.29). Thus the name chosen for the boy was *Ziv*, which means “radiance, brilliance,” and alludes indirectly to the name of his grandfather. Another case did not have a happy ending. A man who knew of my interest in names called me and told me that his wife had recently died. She had a Polish name, *Bronya*. His daughter had just borne a child, but she absolutely refused to name her *Bronya*. Did I have any idea of a similar-sounding name which might be acceptable to a modern young couple? I thought about it, and after some time proposed *Bruryah*, *Blurya*, *Ronya*, *Ronitli*, *Ronah*, and *Ron*. But to no avail; the unhappy grandfather had already thought of all these and none had found favor in the eyes of his daughter and son-in-law.

Sometimes the problems verge on tragedy. In one case a woman who had just given birth cried all day long in her bed in the hospital. A student of mine, lying in her bed nearby, finally approached her and asked her what the problem was and whether she could be of any help. Still crying, the woman told her story: She was an Ashkenazi and her husband a Sephardi, a Jew of Spanish descent. Both their fathers were living and both were called *Mordekhai*, a Biblical name. Now her husband’s father insisted on his grandson being named for him, as is the custom in his community; but her father was squarely opposed to this idea, as in his community one does not name children for living people, because this may lead to their death. The problem remained unsolved when my student left the hospital.

Another case, equally dramatic, happened in a Moroccan family who had decided to do away radically with their ethnic heritage, which they considered a disadvantage in Israeli society. First they had changed their family name from a traditional Moroccan one to a modern Israeli one. Then they had their first son. The mother coined a totally new, unheard-of name for her offspring: the meaningless syllable *Shon*. Came the circumcision ceremony, at which it is customary to announce the name of the male child. When the circumciser pronounced the ritual blessing and said, “and his name in Israel will be called ...,” the mother firmly said “Shon.” The circumciser, who knew the family from Morocco and was already annoyed when he learned that the young couple had altered their family name, said resolutely that *Shon* was no name, and they had better name him *Simon*, an accepted traditional name and therefore naturally out of the question for the modern parents. The circumciser threatened to leave without performing the circumcision, but the mother stood her ground and he finally gave in. But this is not the end of the story. After the circumcision the child fell ill. His illness was grave and took a long time. His mother discovered that she was

not so modern as she had believed herself to be. She resorted to the time-hallowed practice of vowing, that if her child would get well, she would change his new-fangled name to *Simon*. And when the baby recovered, she went to the Population Administration Office and kept her vow.

Children's Names in a Modern and an Orthodox Community

The process of modernization and its accompanying problems did not affect the entire Jewish society of Israel. A part, comprising about twenty percent, continued the ways of life and consequently the traditional ways of naming their children much in the manner of their forefathers. This part of Israeli society is composed of religious Jews, subdivided into an infinity of shadings of religious behavior. Regarding the choice of names for their offspring, one may divide this group roughly into two: the ultraorthodox, who try to cling to all the customs of the past, rejecting the State, and continue to speak Yiddish and to don the garb adopted ages ago in Eastern Europe; and the Zionist religious, who follow the precepts of orthodox Judaism but in many matters are close to the non-religious population. They speak Hebrew, serve in the Army, wear modern clothing, and study secular as well as religious subjects in school and university. Whereas the former consequently use the traditional names, the latter have adopted to some extent the innovations of the non-religious Zionists. This group is very varied in its composition; part of them are very close in their traditionalism to the ultra-orthodox, whereas another part does not differ much from the average, non-religious population at large. How these differences impinge on the names given to children will be made clear by the following investigation.

The study I report on here was carried out in the beginning of 1992. It involves two groups and a partial comparison with a third group. The first group is the total population of schoolchildren and their parents in the small village I live in, Har Gilo, near Bethlehem, situated on a hill overlooking Jerusalem from the south. The children, 48 boys and 39 girls, study in grade 1 to 12 and were born between the years 1974 and 1985. As no age, ethnic, or religious differences were discovered in their names, they will be considered as one group. Their parents (47 couples) form a microcosm of Israel's Jewish society: about half Ashkenazi and half Oriental, with some mixed couples and a few new immigrants from Russia; about twenty percent are religious, but very close in life-style to the nonreligious. Most are middle class, young, and have about three children per family. This group will be designated as Modern. The second group is composed of 30 boys and 30 girls

(and their parents) from the village of Beth-El in the north of Jerusalem. All of the children are in school and are from different grades. The parents belong to a strictly orthodox group, and many of them are connected with a Talmudical College located in the village. They are not classified as ultra-orthodox only because this term, in Israeli usage, refers to the non- or anti-Zionists. Most of the parents (56 couples) have studied at institutes for higher Jewish leaning, and many of them teach at such institutes. Religion forms a very central part of their everyday life. Most of them are Ashkenazi. They too are middle class, young, and their families are mostly large, having five or six children. This group will be referred to as Orthodox. The third group (Ultra-orthodox) is the population of an ultra-orthodox kindergarten with 15 children and their parents.

For the purpose of this study I divided all names into four categories:

- a. Traditional Hebrew: the most widely used names from the Old Testament and other Jewish names consistently used over the ages in all or some communities. All these names will be found at the top of the lists by Nissim Eliassaf (280) and by Lawson (106-07): *Abraham, Sara, Moses, Esther*, and the like.
- b. Renewed Hebrew: mostly Old Testament names which were never or rarely used and were introduced into general use since the late nineteenth century, such as *Gideon, Abner, Tamar, and Mikhal*.
- c. New Hebrew: names coined since the late nineteenth century, such as *Amir, Erez, Adi, Hadas*. To differentiate between categories b. and c., I used the very complete list of names attached to the Hebrew Dictionary of Abraham Even-Shoshan (3: 1496–1508).
- d. Non-Hebrew Names.

Table 1 clearly shows the difference between the two groups. Among the boys, half of the Modern group but only one child in the Orthodox group have newly coined names. As mentioned, the stock of available traditional Hebrew names for girls was quite small, so even the Orthodox group necessarily had to have recourse to innovative names; but they did so to a far smaller extent than the Modern group: 40 percent versus 64 percent. Foreign names are rare, as noted by Lawson (123); they are non-existent among the Orthodox group. Further analysis reveals that the difference is even larger than shown by the numbers. The most traditional names are found in the Orthodox group: 9 out of the 20 first names in

Table 1. Distribution of children's names.

Type	Boys		Girls	
	Modern	Orthodox	Modern	Orthodox
Traditional	23% (11)	63% (19)	10% (4)	23% (7)
Renewed	27% (13)	34% (10)	21% (8)	37% (11)
New	50% (24)	3% (1)	64% (25)	40% (12)
Non-Hebrew	-	-	5% (2)*	-
Total	100% (48)	100% (30)	100% (39)	100% (30)

*One of them a recent immigrant

Lawson's list are represented, among them *Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses,* and *Aaron*. In the Modern group, although larger, only 5 from this list are found; there is no one of the Patriarchs, nor *Moses* and *Aaron*; still, *David* and *Solomon* put in an appearance. At the other end of the scale some of the names in the Modern group are so new that they do not figure even in Smadar Sidi-Shir's recent list of Hebrew names: e.g., *Nohar* 'splendor,' *Eshet Khayil* 'woman of valor,' *Perakh Shaged* 'almond blossom,' *Oneg* 'pleasure'; the first two are girls', the last two boys'. The small group of the Ultra-orthodox preschool children bear names of the same type as the Orthodox group: 9 out of 15 traditional, 4 renewed, and only 2 new ones; sometimes the new names reveal a child whose parents had been non-religious but have changed their way of life and returned to orthodox Judaism.

There is not much difference between the two groups of parents, as Table 2 reveals. There are almost no new names among the fathers of both the Modern and the Orthodox group, and the number of renewed names is comparatively small. This is not so for the mothers; because of the limited number of traditional names both groups make use of renewed and new names, the Orthodox group mainly of the first type and the Modern group mainly of the second type. Two thirds of the men and about 40 percent of the women in the Modern group have traditional names. The reason is that many of them come from orthodox families, and especially the Orientals among them, who make up about half of the modern population. But when they became parents, only relatively few chose traditional names for their own children (and as we have seen, almost none of the most widespread traditional names); this is true for the boys and even more so for the girls. In the Orthodox group the situation is different: 80 percent of the fathers have

Table 2. Distribution of parents' names.

Type	Fathers		Mothers	
	Modern	Orthodox	Modern	Orthodox
Traditional	68% (32)	82% (46)	42% (20)	38% (21)
Renewed	19% (9)	14% (8)	17% (8)	36% (20)
New	9% (4)	4% (2)	30% (14)	21% (12)
Non-Hebrew	4% (2)	-	11% (5)	5% (3)
Total	100% (47)	100% (56)	100% (47)	100% (56)

traditional names; a very high percentage chose similar names for their sons, and when they were attracted by innovation, they only went as far as selecting a renewed name, almost always carrying with it the authority of the Old Testament. Such parents, when asked by neighbors and friends, "Where in God's name did you find the name of ...," will point it out with pride in some obscure genealogical list in the Book of Kings or the Chronicles. As there is less choice for girls, more new names are used. Some of these are chosen or coined by the parents because they have religious associations: *Li'el* 'I have a God,' *Tsviyah*, after *Tsvi*, a female form of the name of a famous Rabbi important for the community of Beth-El; *Moriah*, the name of the place where Abraham offered Isaac. Altogether the two populations of parents, who were not too far from each other in their own names, considerably widened the gap in the generation of their children.

The study shows clearly that the views of the parents influence the choice of names, even when they use the same basic stock. The Modern group tends to select the less used Biblical names and prefers new names, as rare as possible and sometimes invented by the parents themselves. The Orthodox group primarily uses the most traditional names, and puts the use of renewed names, which have Scriptural precedent, over newly invented names. Nevertheless, they too have accepted some new names, especially for girls. The comparison with the small Ultra-Orthodox group shows that there is not too much difference between them and the Zionist Orthodox. I think, not just on the basis of this small study, that this is true in general, although the Zionist Orthodox would probably reject this assertion. But there is more to names than most people realize.

As a final point I would like to add that considerable stress is put on people of both groups to conform. Friends of ours, from a non-religious background, chose the name *Nahum*, one of the Prophets, for their son. As

they knew that "everybody" would be straight against such an antiquated, religious name, they did not reveal it till after the circumcision ceremony; then they had to face the censure of all their family and friends. And among the Orthodox, when somebody proposes a new name for a child, people look askance at him or her and say something about "goyish" (non-Jewish names), which by the way may refer to an Old Testament name not much used in the past. The constant divergent pressures seem gradually to lead to a situation in which the Moderns and the Orthodox will use two different sets of Hebrew names, expressing their conflicting ideologies.

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Note

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