# The Imposition of Hebrew Names on New Immigrants to Israel: Past and Present

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For many years, it has been the accepted practice to give immigrants to Israel Hebrew names, often without considering the wishes of the immigrants themselves. The automatic imposition of Hebrew names was widespread in the 1950s, when the great wave of immigrants from Europe and the Arab countries came to the newly-created state. During the 1970s, when Oriental Jews gradually gained status in Israeli society, this practice became symbolic of the failure to absorb the Oriental immigrants, a failure which still reverberates in Israel today. As immigration rose again around 1990 Israeli authorities tried to avoid the mistakes of the past. One (informal) decision was to be more tolerant of foreign names. Recent observations among members of these immigrant groups show the effect — or lack of effect — of this new attitude.

## The Routine

For many years, probably since the beginning of Zionist immigration ("aliyah"), it was the accepted practice to change the given names of immigrants upon their arrival, and sometimes family names as well (Stahl, *Jewish Family Names* 22-23). The act of giving a person a new name was performed routinely, often without consulting the person concerned. The official simply announced the new name to the often surprised newcomer. In his memoirs about his immigration to Israel, Moroccan immigré Yitskhaq Quenan describes how the guide in the transit camp in France called the group

*Names* 42.4 (December 1994):279-288
ISSN:0027-7738

together and announced each new name: "Isaac... from now on your name is Yitskhaq" (154-5). In other similar name changes *Giselle* became *Ya'el*, and *Armand* became *Amram*. In this case the writer was quite happy with the name change since *Yitskhaq* was the name originally given to him by his parents at his circumcision. But boys or girls who disliked their new names had no recourse; it was the guide who decided for them (Quenan, 154-155).

Often the names were given by teachers when registering the pupils on the first day of school. Rivka Guber, one of the most famous of the teachers at the time of the mass immigration after the foundation of Israel relates how she changed Persian *Fairuz* into Hebrew *Yitskhaq*, and adds: "likewise we did with Jean and Sa'id, Claude, Sabikha and Salimah etc." (49). Additional examples of changing names of immigrants by teachers are related in Goor and Khazan. As a beginning teacher in the same period in the absorption camps and new settlements I did my part, like everyone else. I remember having a pupil named Alegria, from Morocco. Happy to make use of my (very limited) knowledge of Spanish, I told her that henceforth she would be known in the classroom as Simkha, translating her name 'joy' into Hebrew. But she objected: her sister's name was Simkha, and so she remained Alegria. (Having different names with the same meaning in one family was not uncommon in Morocco; see Abbou, 25). In another instance one of the teachers in our school told us that she had a small girl in her class with the impossible name of *Serakh*; impossible, because when the children would become more fluent in Hebrew, they would undoubtedly associate it with the Hebrew word *masri'akh*, which means 'stinking.' The problem was gravely discussed by the whole staff, and we decided on the name *Sarah*. The teacher in question told the child her new name. Some days later the girl's father appeared, angrily demanding why the teacher had changed his daughter's name. The teacher was embarrassed to give the main reason, and said that *Serakh* was not a Hebrew name. Whereupon the father produced a Pentateuch he had brought with him, and showed her the name *Serakh*, daughter of Asher (Gen: 46:17). Only many years later did I learn that the same Serakh, according to Jewish-Persian tradition, was buried near Esfahan. She was revered as a Saint, and many pilgrims visited her tomb. The name was probably given after a

pilgrimage to the famous tomb, and its change necessarily gave rise to opposition in the family.

Not only officials and educators thought it their duty to Hebraize the names of the immigrants. This was done by every "veteran" who encountered a new immigrant with a foreign name. A characteristic example is that of a housewife who employed a Yemenite girl as domestic help and changed her name from *Rumiyah* to *Moriyah* (Kipnis, 18). This is a typical change based upon sound similarity. *Rumiyah* is Arabic and means 'the Roman,' a name alluding to the whiteness of the Westerners, which is considered beautiful in the East. *Moriyah* is the Biblical Hebrew name for the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

### Objections

In some cases children actively opposed the imposition of new names, and stated their wish to continue to use their original names. (Some literary examples, certainly of a autobiographical nature, include those of Amir and Swissa). More often, however, the children submitted to the pressure exerted by their new environment and learned to live with their new names. People who went through the experience of having their names changed automatically by government officials, teachers, nurses or youth guides often remember it with resentment.

The act of changing a person's name is mentioned frequently in the memoirs or novels written by immigrants. Some of the better known are by Hungarian-born Ephraim Kishon and Iraqi-born Eli Amir and David Rabi. In an encounter with the poet Erez Bitton, of Moroccan background, we asked who gave him his modern Hebrew name *Erez*, meaning 'cedar tree.' He said that he preferred not to answer, but that the question was appropriate. Who was it? In one of his poems he expresses his frustration at not being able to be himself, and says he would like to proclaim loudly: "I am not called Zohar, I am Zaish, I am Zaish!" (11) (*Zohar* is the Hebrew name given to Zaish, apparently against his wish). A number of people reverted to their original first names after many years of living under a name they had never felt as being their own or expressing their true selves.

We know from other ethnic groups that names may be considered as an important part of self and group definition. Among black students in a Detroit school I visited in 1991 I noticed names I had never encountered before: *LaChandra, Vernita, Theophus, Female, LaToya, Shenika.* I later discovered that the practice of inventing new names within this group was not a recent phenomenon. It is described by J.L. Dillard as early as 1976. According to Dillard, the invention of new names for members of the group was connected with the rise of black consciousness in the 1960s. In some instances the names represented at least a partial return to African roots. If we may generalize from this example, changing a name by a member of an outside group, particularly when that group is socially dominant, will without question be severely resented.

**Acceptance**

In Israel, most of the immigrants seem to have accepted their new names, along with the many other changes they had to adapt to, without special difficulties. Not long after the mass immigration of the 1950s it became clear that parents of all communities preferred Hebrew names for their children. Edwin Lawson (123) found few non-Hebrew names among those most common in Israel. In my investigation of the trends in name-giving among religious and non-religious parents, I found a strong tendency toward novel names — a break with tradition — among the non-religious from all ethnic communities (Stahl, "Children's Names"). Traditional names are translated or transformed in order to Hebraize and modernize them: Tunisian *Mziana* 'beautiful' first turns into *Yaffah*, and then into the current form *Yaffith*. Often the names given have no connection at all with those common in earlier generations and they follow the prevailing fashions of the time. Genealogical lists clearly show the widespread acceptance of Hebrew names in the younger generation. Similar adaptation occurs in other countries as well. Oriental Jews (as formerly their Ashkenazi brethren) give their children English or French names (Toledano; Abitbol) As for the children, most prefer to have names "like everybody else." In an unpublished study conducted by my student Yisra'el Nir in 1975, 80% of a group of 7th-grade pupils of Oriental origin felt that foreign names should be Hebraized.

**Tolerance?**

It may be assumed that the basic attitudes of Israelis has not changed, and that most think new immigrants should adopt Hebrew names. This is certainly the view of most Israeli children today, without ethnic difference. Talks with pupils in schools which had a heavy influx of immigrants from the U.S.S.R. around 1990 showed that the Israelis wanted the newly arrived "to be like us," and that their idea of successful absorption included the possession of a Hebrew name. But the heavy criticism of the high-handed ways of the 1950s, especially regarding Oriental immigrants, has made people in general more cautious. Particularly among teachers — many of whom are themselves Oriental Jews — one hears the view that immigrants should be left to decide for themselves what name they want to use, or that a teacher may suggest a Hebrew name, but should not impose it. This attitude is part of the general feeling in Israeli society not to "repeat the errors of the 1950s" (Stahl, "Overcoming").

When the first big wave of Jewish immigrants from Ethiopia arrived in Israel in 1985, the practices were at first no different from those of earlier times. Many names were changed by officials upon the immigrants' arrival at the airport, and others by rabbis who presided over the religious act of "immersion," which was often performed as part of their official acceptance into orthodox Judaism. Teachers joined in as well, in many cases simply because they did not want to take the trouble to try to pronounce a strange-sounding name. The name change was accepted, but not always with good grace. An Ethiopian immigrant in a boarding school said: "My father named me Thispai, which is Hope. He gave me this name intentionally, because I was his hope, and also because he hoped we would come to Zion-Jerusalem. Thispai is a beautiful name... Nobody is going to call me Reuben" (Ben-Ezer, 133). Public criticism of the repetition of the old, discredited practices brought about a greater awareness of the importance of a name in the self-image of an individual and a family. This change in attitude can be seen in a booklet brought out in 1986 by Reuben Mamo, a supervisor of religious state-schools which received a large number of Ethiopians. The booklet states that many children were given Hebrew names by officials, without asking them or their parents, and explains 150 Ethiopian names, so that teachers will be able to help children in

choosing an appropriate Hebrew name. It is true that the booklet still aims at change. It does not claim that children or parents are fully entitled to retain their original names. Nevertheless there is a difference in the general atmosphere. There is more understanding, a wish to make the choice together with those involved, an appreciation of the fact that names are important to people. There must be some measure of tolerance towards the culturally different, some thought for the rights of the immigrants. To see the contrast, one has only to remember that no one tried to make up a list of Arabic names and their meanings when hundreds of thousands of new immigrants came from North Africa, Iraq and Yemen.

**Continuity and Change**

The change in attitudes became more pronounced around 1990, with the second wave of Ethiopian Jews in 1991 and the mass immigration of the Jews from the former Soviet Union. During a visit to a school in 1992 I found many Ethiopian children who bore their original names, such as *Malako, Demos, Zamata, Gashai*, and *Aoka*. In some cases the Israeli-born children changed the names of their Ethiopian classmates, either because they were difficult to pronounce or because they wanted them to be more like their own. In some cases it may be that the children heard the name differently, according to their own linguistic habits. Thus a boy whose name is *Asfao* is called *Asaf*, and another, *Ailaq*, is called *Ilan*. In another school, where some of the pupils had been in the country for a longer time, an appreciable number had Hebrew names. These names were often of their own choosing. Teachers told us that children approach them for help in finding a new name, and they try to find a name with a related meaning which is acceptable to the child. For instance, a boy whose name meant 'everyone is afraid of him' was advised to adopt the name of the Biblical hero, Samson.

The general direction of development seems to be that after a longer or shorter time almost all children have Hebrew names. In a study conducted in 1993 by my students Rivka Gelbstein and Etty Tsaban among 60 immigrants from Ethiopia, aged 9-18, they found that all of them had a Hebrew name in addition to their original name, which most continued to use among themselves and at home. Among those who had come in 1985, 43% received their names from

members of the staff of the absorption centers where they stayed after their arrival in the country, whereas 17% got their new names from teachers. After officials had been warned not to change the immigrants' names, the situation changed. Among those who came in 1991, only 10% had Hebrew names given by officials, and 40% had names given by teachers. The rest of the names were chosen by the children themselves or by members of their family. In about half of the cases there is some resemblance in sound between the original and the new name, although sometimes this is rather faint: *Abeba* and *Aviva*, *Adanech* and *Adi*, *Nebev* and *Nira*. As with the adoption of Western names among European and American Jews, the sound similarity is often in the initial position only: *Abraham* and *Arthur*, *Shlomo* and *Seymor*. Only eight out of the total of 60 people had a Hebrew name which recaptured in some way the meaning of the original Ethiopian name, e.g., *Tova* 'good girl' from *Tuva*, 'something good' and *Sigal* 'violet' from *Siyin*, the name of another flower. These names were invariably given by parents or members of the family, and even here the sound seems to have been a factor. In all other instances the name was chosen because it was nice, and not because of any meaningful or associative connection between the old and the new name. Almost all the children and youth who were interviewed were happy with their new names. People familiar with the culture of Ethiopian Jews told me repeatedly that among them children receive different names from different members of the family, and some of these names are connected with incidents in their lives. Therefore adding a name to the others after migrating to a new country may not be as troublesome for Ethiopian Jews as it would be for members of other ethnic groups. When asked whether they would give a child or a sibling born to them a Hebrew or an Ethiopian name, 63% chose the first option and 32% said that they would give the newborn two names, one Ethiopian and one Israeli. The trend towards preferring a Hebrew name was more pronounced among the earlier immigrants.

The Russian Jews who came to Israel at this time were apparently exposed to the process of Hebraization to a lesser extent. This may be because their names do not sound as strange to Israeli ears as the Ethiopian names. In a list of names of immigrant children in one Israeli school which I investigated in 1992, 72 out of 80 students had

Russian names. These included names which have very close Hebrew equivalents, such as *Misha* and *Moshe*, *Anna* and *Khanna*, which were nevertheless not adopted or imposed. In another school in the same year I noticed that of 41 pupils, 28 had Russian names, two had names which could be both Russian and Hebrew (*Ella* ~ *Elah*, *Alexander*) and 11 had Israeli names. It must be remembered that many of the children had been in the country less than a year. There is no doubt that direct and indirect pressure is brought to bear on the immigrants to adopt a Hebrew name as part of their absorption. In 1992 I saw a TV program about the circumcision of Russian Jews arriving in Israel. The Rabbi performing the ritual advised the "new Jews" to change their names: "Boris, what is similar? Barukh!" In a bank I overheard a conversation between a guard and a customer: "What is your name? I forgot, a Russian name, difficult to remember. Why don't you change your name? Galina? I have a good idea for you: Gila." Again, in both examples, the tendency is towards resemblance in sound, which may be the appropriate direction, since it seems that in Western countries (as opposed to Ethiopia, for instance) names are chosen more often for their sound than for their sense. These pressures explain the case of a 12-year-old Russian-born child who does not allow her family to use her old Russian name and insists on the sole use of her new Hebrew name.

The pressures are still there, but it seems they have lost some of their force. Officials and teachers are somewhat more tolerant, although this attitude is more often evident in relation to (white) Russians than to (black) Ethiopians. Ethnic prejudice does not disappear that fast (Stahl, "Overcoming" and "Teachers' Prejudices"). Nevertheless, it is less usual nowadays to change an immigrant's name upon arrival as an administrative act, not requiring the consent of the persons involved. People are often given time to reflect and decide for themselves. In a storybook for children describing the process of adjustment of a Russian immigrant girl (Margulis), it is only after she feels part of the group that she herself decides to take a Hebrew name. In the long run, many if not most will probably choose Hebrew names, and even those who continue to use their foreign names will give Hebrew names to their children. But although of course influenced by the social environment, this decision will be regarded by the people involved as their own free

choice and will not be resented as has often happened in the past. The change in attitude, limited as it may be, can be attributed to the greater awareness of the rights of the individual in Israeli society over the course of its development from community-centered to individual-centered. Perhaps some part of this change may be attributed as well to the social scientists who have studied and described the process of immigrant absorption and criticized its shortcomings.

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