NAMES

Some Background

1. Are names important in Judaism?
Very much so. From biblical times onward, Jews have always devoted great-care to the selection of names. In our Jewish tradition, names can be an expression of individuality, a commemoration of a great life event, a tribute to the dead, or an honor to the living.

2. How did naming begin?
According to Genesis 1:26, God created Adam (derived from the Hebrew, *adamah*, "ground"). Later, after the first woman came into being, Adam called his wife Eve (in Hebrew, *Chavah*, "life") "because she was the mother of all living things." (Genesis 3:20)

Eve named Cain (from the Hebrew, *kinyan*, "acquisition" or "possession") and Abel (in Hebrew, Chevel "vanity"). And so it went, generation by generation, fathers and mothers naming their children on the basis of a variety of criteria.

3. How were names selected in biblical times?
Interestingly, no two people in the Torah have the same given name. Indeed, the same might be said of the entire Bible, with one or two exceptions. Imagine how unique it was to be the only person in the world with your name! Some people were named after birds and animals, like Jonah ("dove"). Some were named after plants or flowers, like Tamar ("palm"). Isaac ("laughter") derived his name from an event: Sarah, his mother, laughed when God's messengers announced that she would bear a child at the age of 90. (Genesis 18:12) And Eve as we have seen, was named for an idea, the concept of life itself. In biblical times, we find the mother selecting a child's name in almost every instance; the name was given at birth. This practice was modified over the centuries; with both parents gradually coming to choose the name and with the name conferred during special ceremonies.

4. When did Jews begin naming children after other people?
This custom began in the sixth century B.C.E., after the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem. By custom, not law, Jews started to name their sons and daughters after close relatives. Ashkenazic Jews named infants only after those who had died. usually grandparents, in the belief that to name a child after a living person might shorten that person's life. Sephardic Jews, on the other hand, often named babies after the living, usually a grandparent or a parent. To the Sephardim, this custom was an expression of great honor and respect. These two naming patterns continue today in Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities around the world.

5. Did a child's name always match that of the relative?
At first, the name chosen was exactly the same as that of the relative. As time went on, however, modern equivalents were often substituted. Jews did not hesitate to adopt names reflective of the culture in which they lived. Moses was an Egyptian name, Mordechai and Esther, Babylonian. The great Jewish philosopher Philo had a Greek name, while the name of the brilliant medieval Jewish scholar Saadia was Arabic.

The rabbis of the talmudic era were concerned that "modern" names might lead to assimilation. In the post-talmudic period, therefore, the custom arose of Jews having two names, one civil, one Hebrew. The civil, or secular, name was the name you were "called by" in your day-to-day life, as well as the name on your civil birth certificate. Your Hebrew name, on the other hand, was used when you were called up to the Torah (an *aliyah),* when someone prayed for your health (a *misheberach),* and for all other religious documents (such as a *ketubah* or a *get).*

This practice enabled Jews to take more modern given names, to use only the first letter of the deceased or living relative's first name, or, as they chose, to select a biblical name or the actual name of the relative.

6. Did all Jews name children after relatives?
No. As names were a matter of custom rather than Jewish law, the people were free to name their children as they wished. Countless numbers of Jewish children, for example, were named after the sympathetic conqueror, Alexander the Great. Chasidic Jews often gave their children the name of their revered rebbe. Jewish values became names,

as in Shalom or Shlomo. And, for those who dreamed of a return to (he land of our ancestors, their children were given the names of sites in *Eretz Yisrael,* such as Sharon (as in Sharon Valley). The children bore living testimony to their eternal hope of returning to the land. On the other hand, some families named *exclusively* after departed relatives. Scholars enjoy pointing to the family of the great Jewish teacher, Hillel, where only four male names (Hillel, Simon, Gamaliel, and Judah) were used in fourteen generations, spanning some 500 years!

7. When did Jews begin to use last names?

With few exceptions, not until the eighteenth century. Before-that time, a child was identified as a *bar* (son of) or *bat* (daughter of) y (the father's Hebrew first name). Thus, Daniel ben Mosheh was Daniel the son of Moses, and Tsiporah bat Yosef was Tsiporah the daughter of Joseph. We see this practice illustrated in the Bible in the person of Joshua bin (ben) Nun, Joshua the son of Nun.

After the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE.), Jews moved into many different societies, with the word for "son" or "daughter" changing with the host country. When Jews spoke Aramaic (beginning second century C.E), the formula was *x bar* y, as in Bar Kochba. It is from the Aramaic that we also get the term *bar mitzvah,* or "son of the commandment." In Arabic-speaking lands. the word "son" was "*ibn*," hence names like Solomon ibn Gabirol, Solomon the son of Gabirol.

Because this custom often resulted in very long names, some Jews were referred to by acronyms consisting of the first initials of their names. The most famous of these was RaMBaM for Rabbi Moses ben Maimon. Note that the title of Rabbi was added to the beginning of the name. while the religious status of the individual, if a *kohen* (descendantof the Temple priests) or a *Levi* (descendant of the Temple assistants to the *kohen),* was appended at the end as *Hakohen* or *Halevi*.

8. Why was the eighteenth century a turning point?

About the time of the French Revolution, most European countries passed laws ordering all Jews to take surnames. In many instances, this was a device to promote assimilation of the Jews into modem society, the age of enlightenment having freed them from the ghetto and granted them a measure of equality. For a great number of Jews, selecting a family name was a simple matter. A Hebrew name such as Avraham ben Yosef became Abraham Josephson, or Moses ben Mendel became Moses Mendelssohn. Other Jews took the name of the city .or country in which they lived, resulting in family names like Warschauer (Warsaw). Berliner, and Hollander. One's religious status sometimes became a last name, as with Cohen or Levy. And professions were also used. like Cantor, Singer, Lehrer (teacher), or Goldsmith.

In some countries, however, the imposition of surnames served as an opportunity for anti-Semitic hatred to find expression. Jews were often forced to take demeaning names, like Fresser (glutton). A few countries prohibited Jews from using Jewish names altogether, while the Nazis selected 279 'special" names reserved for Jews alone. These included the names of ancient Jewish persecutors, Ahab, Moab, and Jezebel, and names expressing contempt, like *cnamor* (donkey). Occasionally, the origin of a family name reflected-a touching story. Such was the case with a Scandinavian Jewish man, whose beloved wife. Henya, had recently died. When the government enacted a law requiring the adoption of surnames, he decided to make his family name a memorial to his life-partner. Thus the name Hendin came into being.

Over the past 4,000 years, our customs and practices regarding given and family names have undergone much change.

Names: Some Jewish Teachings, Superstitions, and Favorites

We have examined how names came into being, some of the ways in which Jews selected names for their children, and the historical events leading to adoption by Jews of last names. In terms of Jewish teachings, however. the ultimate attainment in life is a good name, a respected name.

1. How do Jewish teachings reflect this position?
Consider these five statements, two from the Bible. two from the midrashic literature, and one from the Mishnah:

a) "A good name is preferable to great riches." (Proverbs 22: 1)

b) "A good name is better than fine oil." (Ecclesiastes 7:1)

c) "The earned name is worth much: more than the given name." (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah*)

d) "Every person has three names: one parents give them, one others call them, and one they acquire themselves" (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah*).

e) "There are three crowns, the crown of the Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of royalty, but the crown of a good name excels them all" (*Pirke Avot*).

It is no accident that the founder of Chasidism was called the Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name) or that God is sometimes referred to merely as Hashem (The Name). A Jewish name, then, was far more than a label; by striving to make it a good name, the Jew aimed at transforming it into a badge of honor.

2. Did our ancestors ever change their names?
Yes, and for different reasons. In the Torah, two stories in particular illustrate how a change of name reflected a change in character. During his early years, Abram (father of Aram) moved toward monotheism and leadership of the Jewish people. Later in life, God changed his name to Abraham (father of a multitude of nations), a change of name as a reward for a lifetime of service to God. Jacob (heel grasper) stole his brother Esau's birthright, deceived his father; Isaac, and had to leave home as a result . Later in life, however, after wrestling with the angel (or some say his identity), he became Israel (champion of God), the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the progenitor of the Jewish people.

3. How are names connected with superstitions?
Throughout Jewish history, names were viewed as having special power. Accordingly, many superstitions grew up around names, especially during the Middle Ages. Some Jews had secret names, which they would not reveal to anyone. Other Jews refused to marry a person who had the same name as their mother or father, and would even hesitate to live in the same town as an individual bearing their name. All of these customs derived in large measure from a fear that the Angel of Death might confuse two people of the same name, leading to the premature demise of one or the other.

To further "confuse". the Angel of Death, Jewish families often took unusual steps in selecting names. In Poland, in a household where several young people had died, babies would sometimes receive names indicative of advanced years, such as Alter (old) or Zaida (grandfather). A Custom followed by some Jews, even in modern times, is that of changing the name of a person who is near death. In accordance with talmudic, rabbinic, and mystical traditions, the individual is given a name such as Chaim (life) or its female equivalent, Chayah.