Abstract

Even as individuals are granted the right to name and be named, they are acting in the context of a given society, each with its own cultural and political designs. It follows that societies are wont to regulate the area of personal names. They do so by means such as fashion and social pressure. In addition, this article argues, the institution of law is intimately, if not always obviously, tied up with personal names and naming. The focus of the article is the naming of Jewish girls. In this regard, centuries of Jewish history have produced exceedingly similar findings: compared to men’s names, which tend to line-up in long, ongoing patrilineal formation, women’s names tend to change from time to time and from place to place, and are frequently summarily discontinued. This article suggests that one of the reasons for the aforementioned “nominal” gender discrepancy is that the law has consistently considered only men’s names to be of importance, hence the dispensing of the shaping of women’s names to the more fleeting forces of fashion and so on, rather than the more enduring forces of tradition and inter-generational continuity. In other words, it is submitted that had the law attributed more to Jewish women’s names, there might have been “more to them.”

1. Introduction

The Midrash tells us that, “People are called by three names: One is the name the person is called by his father and mother; one is the name people call him/her; and one is the name the person acquires for him/herself” (Tanhuma, Vayakheil 1). But even as an individual is granted the right to name and be named, s/he is acting in the context of a group, family, community, and society at large, each with its own cultural and political contours and designs.

Said another way, the annals of Jewish history are built upon the names of individual Jews. It is common to cling to these names as if they embody the very lives of the personalities they once described. In practice, however, people’s names are largely a reflection as well as a product of broader societal decision-making. Indeed, scholars regard personal names as an important instrument of social control and a prime tool of the (Foucauldian) disciplining of populations.¹

It follows that societies are wont to regulate the using, choosing, and changing of personal names. They do so by means ranging from the informal, such as fashion and social pressure, to the more formal, like superstitions and religious customs. This
article argues that even the institution of law is intimately, if not always obviously, tied up with personal names.  

Specifically, this article constitutes a survey of research concerning Jewish personal or first names and the laws and customs governing them, as viewed through the prism of the question of where and when Jewish women enter. In truth, the quest is not a simple one, for if the amount of research on names in general is small, and that concerning Jewish names is even smaller, only a fraction of the latter concern Jewish women in particular. Authors often claim to be discussing the Jewish onomasticon (list of names in use among Jews), but frequently tend at some point to include a reference or two to Jewish women’s names. In other words, as Cynthia Ozick has pointed out, “‘Jew’ means ‘male Jew.’”

Under these circumstances, this study has allowed the spread of various sources—as listed in the accompanying bibliography—to set the contours for debate. Accordingly, this article proceeds, in chronological order, from the periods of the Tanakh and Talmud to the exiled communities living in the Diaspora during the Middle Ages and through the Emancipation. It will also take a look at the regulation of Jewish names during the dark age of modern anti-Semitism and the Nazi Era. It will end with the time of the Return to Zion and the emergent State of Israel, updating the findings to the present day.

Ultimately, the aim is to amalgamate at least a good deal of the existing research concerning Jewish women’s personal names and naming, on the one hand, and the various laws and regulations that affect Jewish personal names and naming, on the other. With regard to the latter, this study has found that even as Jewish history is dotted with attempts by both Jews and non-Jews to denote and define Jewish names, a closer look reveals that more often than not these regulations refer only to the names of Jewish men. In terms of the former, the study has found that the minority of women who do earn a mention in historical texts are often stripped of a name. Moreover, those women who are named are found to have far fewer traditionally Jewish names than their male counterparts. Instead, Jewish women’s names appear to be highly influenced by the more fleeting localized and contemporaneous forces of fashion sentiment and so on.
Examining these findings together suggests the possibility of their being related to one another. Specifically, it might be deduced that the law’s persistent tendency to consider only men’s names to be of importance has engendered history’s repeated failure to mention women’s names, as well as their tendency to be shaped by more fleeting forces, such as fashion, rather than more enduring forces of inter-generational continuity and so on. Simply put, had the law attributed more to Jewish women’s names, they might have played a more notable part in Jewish history and tradition.

2. The Biblical/Tanakhic Period
The Tanakh all but begins with God’s commanding of Adam to name the animals, but it makes no (explicit) rulings on the naming of human beings. Thus, even as it is clear that the first Jew held a name, it is difficult to say when the concept of the “Jewish name” was born. As for the differences between the names of (Jewish) girls and boys in particular, the Tanakh is not only silent on the matter but even contains examples of unisex names. However, these are commonly considered to be “rare exceptions.”

Scholars who have compared the given names of the two sexes have discerned some differences between them. Accordingly, just as the Deity Himself is found to bear mainly male names; so men have been found to bear far more theophoric names than women. Some scholars maintain that the male names are more likely than the female ones to connote heroic and leadership qualities. Others suggest that the Bible attributes little profundity to women’s names at all.

In any case, by far the most consistent finding regarding women’s names in the Tanakh is their relative absence. More specifically, it said that of the 1,711 names contained in the Tanakh, the number of identified female names is ninety-nine. Furthermore, this statistic for women did not improve in time. According to one scholar:

The names of women are mentioned in the Tanakh only until the period of Babylonian Diaspora. The last woman whose name is mentioned is the daughter of Zerubavel, Shlomit, mentioned in connection with the dynasty of King David. From her (end of the sixth century BCE) until the mention of the Hasmonite Queen, Alexandra Shlomtzion (about 70 AD) we have no knowledge of women’s names. The few women known to us to bear Hebrew names are Miriam the Hasmonite and the women from the New Testament, the two Miriams: Jesus’ mother and Magdalene.
In total, the number of female names found in the classical Hebrew sources is said to be less than a tenth of the number of Hebrew male names. To be sure, when the number of biblical characters is counted as opposed to names per se, this huge discrepancy is significantly reduced. Indeed, many of the Tanakhic names appear only in genealogy lists. These are traditionally seen as patrilineal lists, that is, the names of the fathers and the sons whom they begot, without making any mention of the women who bore the sons. As such, according to feminist biblical scholar Alice Laffey, these patrilineal genealogy lists entail a “buried category” of unnamed women characters who “exist in the text only by inference.”

It can be argued that the rules of Hebrew grammar are responsible for having transformed many ambiguous names into men’s names. Accordingly, females are often subsumed under masculine terminology. For example, several times in the Tanakh the word banim (sons) or ish (man) is used to refer to both men and women, or woman is subsumed under the masculine generic pronoun. It has been suggested that this “masculine by preference” rule affects the way readers interpret a text, including proper names. It seems, however, more likely that this leaning towards male names is less likely a function of the rules of Hebrew grammar than a product of the Hebrew laws of patrilineal succession, including use of the term beit av (father’s house) to designate the basic family unit; levirate marriage; and the principles of primogeniture in the inheritance of land. If so, then the apparent lack of significance attributed to (Jewish) women’s names in the Tanakh—as reflected in their (possibly) less momentous meanings as well as the repeated failure to mention them altogether—may be attributed to law, primarily the law that regulates inheritance.

It is noteworthy that similar conclusions about women’s names and their status (or lack thereof) have been reached by historians studying a population as far afield as non-Jewish medieval Europe. Specifically, at that time, European society was gradually transforming itself from a bilineal structure to a patrilineal one. In the emerging patrilineal dynasties, traditional, familial names transmitted from male to male became increasingly important. Conversely, women’s function in the process of inheritance and hence, the significance of their names, was greatly diminished.
Historians connect this change in law with a finding that would be increasingly relevant regarding Jewish women’s names, namely, that from here, the path to less traditional names for girls was set. In the words of one historian, “Not novelty or fashion but economic and social inferiority paved the way for the easy acceptance of non-traditional names for women.”

In the final analysis, the few biblical names for women that have lasted through the generations are those of the matriarchs—Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, and Miriam and Esther. “Ironically,” as Jewish names expert Aaron Demsky points out, “Esther, one of the most popular Jewish names, is not Hebrew in origin but rather derived from a Mesopotamian/gentile name of the goddess Ishtar.”

3. The Talmudic Period

The first explicit reference to a discrepancy between the names of Jews and non-Jews is encountered in the Tannaic period, after the destruction of the First Temple and the beginning of the dispersion of the Jews. From this stage, it appears that ancient scholars attribute national importance to personal names. They state that it was inter alia owing to the fact that the children of Israel retained their (Jewish) names that they earned redemption from slavery in Egypt.

Scholars explain this proclamation as the rabbis admonishing members of their own generation who had begun choosing Greek (and to a lesser extent, Roman) names above traditional ones. This becomes especially clear in other versions of this statement where the Midrash goes on to bring examples of the use of vernacular names such as Rufus for Reuven (VaYikra Raba 32:5).

If this was indeed a rabbinical admonition of contemporaneous Jews for adopting Greek and Roman names, then there is room to conclude that the proclaiming rabbis’ concern was primarily with Jewish men. This is because, according to historians, from the end of the Second Temple Era, Jewish women tended not to bear vernacular names of this sort. Rather, their names tended to be Aramaic.

The reason given for this discrepancy between the names of Jewish men and their female counterparts is that the latter were for the most part excluded from political and business life. This exclusion of women appears to have affected their names not just in terms of their language; it also resulted in the omission of their names from the
(historical) records of various business transactions, tax returns and so on. As such, it would subsequently be invoked as a reason for the dearth in our current knowledge of past Jewish women’s names.  

Another reason for the aforementioned lack of knowledge of past Jewish women’s names are the halakhic principles governing the use of names upon documents pertaining to marriage and divorce, first set out in the Talmudic tractate of Gittin. Accordingly, only the names of fathers are mentioned on all the relevant legal documents. This rule of nomenclature, coupled with the rule according to which only men may be witnesses, meant that for every one woman’s name slotted into the relevant text appear those of seven men, namely, the bride’s father, the groom’s first name and father’s name, and the two male witnesses’ names and their respective fathers’ names.  

Under these circumstances, it is somewhat ironic that the sole Talmudic tractate to deal with women’s names is gittin (divorce law). A further irony is that the only two women’s names mentioned there are Sarah and Miriam, whereas in practice, as mentioned previously, contemporaneous Jewish women tended to bear Aramaic names. In other words, even as Jewish women did not generally bear names in the Greek or Roman vernacular, their names were not Hebrew either. The next section will show that this trend of providing Jewish women with neither entirely vernacular nor purely Hebrew names would only gain momentum in time.

Another precursor of things to come might be found in Tal Ilan’s “Notes on the distribution of Jewish women’s names in Palestine in the Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods.” Ilan finds that approximately half of the women in her sample shared the same name. One scholar has explained this type of trend as indicative of how “expectations were generally standard for all women.” Ilan makes the point that the “nominal” discrimination against Jewish women living at this time begins even earlier—with their constituting only ten percent of the sample.

Indeed, the central finding of scholars of this period is the failure to inscribe the names of women in the most sacred Jewish texts; even as those very texts begin to talk explicitly about the significance of Jewish names for the life of the Jewish people. Furthermore, even the institution of the principle of matrilineal descent in the
transmission of Judaism—other than conversion, a Jewish mother is a prerequisite for Jewish status—did not earn more standing and significance for Jewish women’s names.41

4. The Middle Ages

Even as the rabbis of the Talmud lauded the ancient children of Israel for retaining their (Jewish) names, it was only in the following period that Tanakhic names came to be widely used by Jews.42 Introduced into use were even those such as Avraham, Aharon, Moshe, David, Shlomo, Eliyahu, and Yisrael, which until then had apparently been considered “taboo.”43 (The taboo on names of biblical figures who preceded Abraham was maintained to a large extent thereafter, although it does not appear to have applied to a single female name.44)

In addition, it became customary for names to be passed from generation to generation, as Jews began to name their children after their ancestors. While some identify the roots of this custom in the Tanakh, most researchers agree that it came into being some time thereafter, and that its origins were in the practices of the gentile populations among whom the Jews lived, be it the Egyptians or the Greeks.45

Most significantly, however, both these trends appeared to apply mainly to Jewish men’s names. Thus, for example, the primary focus of the custom of “naming after,” at least initially, appears to have applied to the naming of sons after their grandfathers—whether paternal or maternal.46 In addition, boys might be granted the names of great rabbis—even if they were not traditionally Jewish names till then, for example, Saadia HaGaon or Rabeinu Behayeh. In this way, the corpus of Jewish names for males, which was already much larger than that of girls, continued to grow.47

In contrast, Jewish names for girls were characterized by mutations and change, from place to place and from generation to generation. As Goitein wrote of the medieval Arabic-speaking Jewish communities, “Changing fashions in the preferences for certain names or groups of names for girls can be observed throughout the ‘classical’ Geniza period.”48 A high number of foreign first names were used for girls/women, particularly in Sephardi communities.49
In Ashkenaz, Jewish women’s names tended to be neither wholly Tanakhic/Hebrew nor entirely in the local vernacular but somewhere in-between. Generally, one might speak of “Yiddish names.” Rella Israly Cohn explains, “The name stock of Yiddish draws heavily on Hebrew and Aramaic and on German, but there are a few Greek and Latin names, other Romance names, some Slavic names, and an abundance of suffixes, primarily from German and Slavic.” Accordingly, the lists of Jewish women’s names have been described as constituted by “the strangest conglomerate of corruptions and diminutives, borrowings and mutations.” Benzion Kaganoff brings examples such as these:

Trestel comes from the German Troest, “consolation,” and was used for the Hebrew Nechamah, which is also “consolation,” as in the Italian name Consolina, which is only found among Jews… Shprinzel is a Polish Jewish ‘improvement’ on Esperanza, brought East by Italian Jews. It was a regular practice for the Jews of Italy to translate the Hebrew Tikvah (hope) into Esperanza. The name became Esperance among the French Jews and was transformed into Sprinze as it moved through Germany and Poland.

Perhaps one could call these names, as some have seen fit to categorize the rabbinic view of women themselves, yetzurei kilayim—ambiguous, anomalous hybrids. An alternative description of Jewish women’s names might be “kosher-style.” Many of these names embody stereotypical feminine qualities, like Scheindel (beautiful) and Bayla (pretty), Libba (loved), Reyna (pure) and Alegra (joy) or were ornamental names, like Kreindel (crown) or the names of flowers like Bluma and Sasha (rose). There were also corrupted biblical names, such as Riva or Virginia for Rivka, Feigel for Tsiporah, Manya, or Masha for Miriam and Eidel for Adina. As in the previous era, women’s names were frequently repeated. Another common feature of Jewish women’s names is the use of diminutives, for example, in order to temper Tanakhic names in cases where they were given to women. Some scholars view the use of diminutive names as symbolic of the status of women in society—women are objectified as sexual objects, and seen to be dependent on and subservient to men. It is nonetheless noteworthy that in Medieval Europe, diminutive names were common among Jewish men too. In fact, the general use of diminutive names among the Jews of Medieval Europe, coupled with the view of such names as symbolizing inferiority and even sexual subservience, is viewed as
indicative of their general status as a largely despised minority. Some scholars describe this as the feminization of the male galuti (Diaspora) Jew.

The diminutive names used for Jewish males, however, does not quite match those used for their female counterparts for, even as many Jewish boys and men bore diminutive names, or perhaps a name in the vernacular, such names were secondary—they tended to be substantively or semantically connected to the “official” Jewish name they bore, otherwise known as the shem kodesh.

Specifically, during the Middle Ages, the rabbis instituted a clear (legal) distinction between the secondary shem khol or kinnui or “cradle name”—to be used solely for secular (chol) purposes, as opposed to the shem kodesh, which was to be used in religious contexts. It follows that in talking of an “official” Jewish name, my reference is the halakhic concept of the shem kodesh—literally, sacred name, and in the terminology of Leopold Zunz—author of the renowned Namen Der Juden (1837)—the “church name.” These included Tanakhic names, together with most Talmudic names, and, to a large extent, Hebrew names generally, as implied by the alternative term shem lashon hakodesh, that is, a name in the Holy tongue.

The shem kodesh was to be bestowed upon every Jewish boy at his brit mila (circumcision)—some say, through divine inspiration—and was to be used by him for all religious occasions, primarily when “called up” to the Torah. In other words, it was clearly a male institution. As one pair of researchers has written, “The choice of a name at birth and the public readings from the Pentateuch every week in the synagogue are occasions when the links between grandson and grandfather, son and father are renewed.”

It is noteworthy that according to some scholars, it was only with the institution of the custom of “calling up [male congregates] to the Torah” on Shabbat and festivals according to the formula “x son of y” that Jews became aware of the need to bestow upon a male infant an officially sanctioned Jewish name at his brit mila. Certainly women’s non-inclusion in public religious ritual is often cited as the reason why Jewish women were wont to bear less Jewish names than their male counterparts.

It seems, however, that the lack of concern shown by the rabbis for Jewish women’s names cannot be excused as a mere inadvertent by-product of the larger exclusion of
women from (public) Jewish rituals. Might the rabbis not have established a more general demand that every Jew—male or female—bear a Jewish name regardless of their respective participation in public rituals? By way of comparison, around the fifteenth century, the Church began to insist that names be “of some male or female saint and not pagan names, or shortened names or meaningless names.” Clearly the injunction pertained to the members of both sexes. In practice, even an explicit halakhic directive prohibiting the granting of shmot kodesh to women has never been unearthed. As already stated, many Jewish girls in diverse medieval communities were given Tanakhic names. However, the status of a shem kodesh is forfeited when used in the diminutive or corrupted form, as frequently occurred in conjunction with women. One apparent exception to the rule may be found in Goitein’s study of the Cairo Genizah. Goitein found that amongst the women of the medieval Jewish communities of Egypt and Yemen there were neither biblical nor other Hebrew names at all. In the case of Egypt, Goitein interpreted the aforesaid absence as reflecting the rift between women and the world of Torah and learning. Regarding the Jewish women of Yemen, however, he observed that among their husbands, religious learning was more diffuse than had been so with the Jews of Egypt in the Geniza period. Under these circumstance, he surmised, “One must… reckon with the possibility that the absence of biblical and theophoric names among women was originally not a matter of free choice but was a taboo imposed by males, and became an accepted custom only in the course of time.” Against this backdrop, it is interesting to note the findings of Gila Hadar regarding Jewish women’s names in Salonika, widely known as the “Jerusalem of the Balkans.” Hadar summarizes her not unusual findings regarding the tendency to give boys traditional names while girls’ names were influenced by social and cultural trends. She goes on to remark: “The personal name of a woman given to her at birth had little significance. The meaning and existence of a girl was only within the collective Jewish context in her role as woman, mother, and widow. After her marriage a woman was no longer called by her personal name but was known as the wife of or the widow of someone.” Even among the graves of the Salonika Jewish community, women’s names were frequently omitted from their own tombstones.
5. The Age of Emancipation

In the seventeenth century, control over forenames became an important source of influence for the Church: the catechism of the Council of Trent declared that the giving of “profane” pagan names to children would “constitute a living echo of unacceptable beliefs, [a]n insult to the true faith [and] a permanent challenge to the authority of the Church.” Some say that it was initial church control over names, as well as church domination generally, which led to the tight state control over names in many Continental countries later on.

Be that as it may, in 1789 a law was passed in Austria specifying that all records of birth, death, and marriage were to mention German-only first names (and surnames). Similarly, in 1808 Napoleon commanded all subjects of the French Empire who were affiliated with the Jewish synagogue and who had not yet assumed French first names (and surnames) to adopt such identification within three months from the publication of the decree and to register these names with the officials of the Etat Civil of their residence. These (that is, the Austrian and French) laws served as models for the promulgation of some twenty-eight similar decrees throughout Europe over the next sixty years or so. In short, the adoption by Jews of vernacular first names (and surnames) was made a legal prerequisite for the emancipation of the Jews.

In practice, as the Age of Emancipation drew near, more and more Jews had begun choosing vernacular names for themselves and for their children anyway. It follows that many Jews welcomed the new regulations, seeking to rid themselves and their children of any barriers to their integration and assimilation into non-Jewish society. Furthermore, as time progressed, some Jews sought to change their names in order to escape growing anti-Semitism.

Researchers remain confident that the great majority of the Jews resented the new regulations and engineered ways to retain their traditional “Jewish names.” Such findings, however, must apply primarily to Jewish men for whatever the general Jewish attitude towards name-changing, all agree that the choice of a vernacular name has always been particularly widespread among girls.
If anything, the requirement that Jews register their names was often made use of (by fathers) to change the names of their Jewish daughters from old-fashioned, Jewish-sounding vernacular ones to (an even more limited variety of) more modern-sounding names. The rabbis, however, do not appear to have looked kindly upon such nominal modernization; it was at this time that they began to make explicit mention of women’s names. More specifically, halakhic opposition to the adoption of “strange and gentile names” behind which lay the explicitly forbidden desire “to be like the non-Jews” and which was considered to be the first step towards defilement, was finally voiced for girls as well as for boys.

Such halakhic directives, however, took on a different slant for girls, because only a minority held truly Jewish names in the first place. What happened was that the formerly mentioned “kosher-style” “cradle names” sported by the majority of Jewish women “took on the venerable status of biblical ones.” Thus, for example, the Hatam Sofer states that a girl’s “cradle name [such as Hindel or Feigel] is her shem Yisrael”—she is not named as such in order to be like non-Jews. One rabbi explicitly regards the girl’s “cradle name” as “a shem kodesh or, at least, close to a shem kodesh....” Another writes: “The first name, is used for matters of kedusha or for things written in the holy tongue, like the ketubba and shtarot and the giving of a ‘mi sheberech’ and so on; and for men, to be called up to read the Torah.” In practice, even as these “kosher-style” names earned the status of a (quasi) shem kodesh, they soon became old-fashioned and largely fell out of use altogether.

Finally, it is noteworthy that even state-imposed laws of registration sometimes failed to provide Jewish women with an official name. Thus was the case of the Jewish community of Salonika after 1928, when mandatory population registration was instituted as part of the policy of Hellenization imposed by the Greek regime on the general population, including the Jewish community. Though some parents did register their daughters in the community documents at this time, many others refrained from doing so until a short while before their marriage—the records show that this was often the first time women were registered in community records. Ironically, the non-registration of girls in the community records was ultimately beneficial to the Jewish community in Salonika. With no formal registration of girls in
the community records, those going to Palestine could change their identity cards and passports and add daughters, change their ages, and give new life and names to adopted children.  

6. Name Laws and Anti-Semitism

The eighteenth and nineteenth century regulation of Jews’ names by European governments, discussed in the previous section, was motivated by the desire to emancipate/assimilate the Jews by requiring them to adopt names like the rest of the population. However, from as early as 1816, almost immediately after the Jews had chosen fixed names, a series of decrees forbidding the adoption of “Christian names” by Jews were passed in Prussia. By the end of the nineteenth century, “new/modern” anti-Semitic laws with regard to names openly sought to prevent the emancipation/assimilation of the Jews.

Somewhat ironically, perhaps, in the attempt to account for the ardor of the anti-Semitism underlying the new names regulations, some scholars hold the earlier emancipation and/or assimilation of (some of) the Jews of Europe as responsible. In his thorough historical analysis of anti-Semitic name legislation in Prussia-Germany, Dietz Bering shows how as soon as Jews were no longer completely ensnared—or preserved—in their openly visible existence, that is, their own language, clothing, style of beard, customs, and so on, the structural position of their names invariably changed. Henceforth, a Jew’s name came to be considered by anti-Semites as nothing less than conclusive proof of a person’s Jewishness, and the further assimilation progressed, the more they worked towards “the covert branding of Jews for the purpose of ensuring identification and the massive derision of names.”

Any work dealing with the regulation of Jewish names would have to deal with this nominal anti-Semitism in depth; less so a work studying the names of Jewish women. This is because the evidence suggests that up until the Nazi Era, it was mainly Jewish men’s names that came under anti-Semitic attack. Certainly Jewish men were more likely to find themselves outside the protection of the home and steeped in the hostility of the marketplace. It follows that most of the attempts by Jews to divest themselves of their Jewish names in the face of growing anti-Semitism were made by men; most of them being men of commerce.
In addition, Bering argues, the anti-Semitic attacks on the forenames of Jewish men as opposed to those of Jewish women tended to be harsher and more severe. This was because “it was customary among the Jewish group in particular to give the first-born son the name of the grandfather.” This same custom, coupled with the tendency to stick to the principle that their synagogal name be linked to their official civil one by consonance, meant that even when Jewish men did choose alternatives to their ancient Hebrew names, their newly chosen replacements tended to be readily recognizable as Jewish too.

In time, actual laws were enacted with the aim of attaining anti-Semitic ends in connection with names. Initially pertaining only to surnames, they eventually came to apply to forenames too. Thus, in 1897 the arbitrary change of first names was made punishable by law; neither evading anti-Semitic pressure nor considerations “of an easier livelihood” was to be acknowledged as acceptable reasons for a change of name. Within a few years, a change of first name, even on the occasion of conversion to Christianity or adoption, was made dependent on ministerial permission in the case of Jews. Here, too, the effects were greater for Jewish men, who were more likely than the women to choose this path in the first place.

During the Nazi era, however, Jewish women’s names came under direct fire too. On January 5, 1938 the Nazis passed the Law Concerning the Change of Surnames and First Names, which required compulsory changing (back) of every “[un]desirable” Jewish change of name before January 30, 1933—irrespective of whether the person was alive or dead. But even while the revocation proceedings were being dealt with, the Nazis enacted their infamous name decree which required every Jewish man, woman and child to bear a “Jewish first name.”

In order to facilitate the decree, a list was compiled that specified those forenames which were to be the only ones still permitted for Jews. The list was divided into 185 men’s and less than half that number (!) of women’s names. (Anyone who did not have a typically Jewish name contained in the list—which included most—was forced to adopt the first name “Israel” or “Sara” respectively.) Noticeably absent were names such as Maria, Hana, Ruth, Josef and Jacob—because these names were
popular among German gentiles too. Those that were included have been described as “grossly strange-sounding specimens.”

The local national socialist newspaper declared, “It was in fact intended through this choice of names not to deride but to identify Jews in Germany.” Other papers, however, were more candid about the Nazis’ underlying, derisive intentions: “Saudik, well, that is a term, a respectable, honest one, which would do credit to any pig swill, but there again nothing fits the word Sprinze anymore; no rubber heel that takes any pride in itself can be called that, no toilet paper, no, that—now I’ve got it—can only be the name of a Jewess.”

Some scholars argue that the main purpose of the Nazi name laws was to facilitate the easy collection of the Jews in order to carry out the final solution. Whatever the case, the name laws were soon followed by the demand that every Jew wear a yellow star for even better identification. In other words, “If in the branding by names the moment of contact was the envisaged breaking point, the visual stigma guaranteed the separation of the Jews before any contact.”

Thereafter came their “spatial isolation in concentration camps, where a name became wholly superfluous as a characteristically human quality” and numbers were burned into the skin of the Jews for the purpose of identification. At this level of completely inhuman branding, there were no longer any differences between the designations of Jewish men and Jewish women. The current Holocaust names memorial project attempts to restore the names to the millions of victims, men and women alike. It is nonetheless unfortunate that the official title of this laudable project entails use of the male generic: Lkol Ish Yesh Shem—To Every Man a Name.

7. Jewish Women’s Names in the Zionist Era

Introduction

Aside from the name laws discussed earlier, the spread of modern anti-Semitism had another, less direct influence on Jews’ names: it reinforced the creation of the Zionist movement, which in turn was to have the most radical influence of Jewish names than had ever been observed before. The Zionist reassertion of Jewish ethnic unity had produced a broad continuum of movements in Eastern Europe by the turn of the nineteenth century, with general objective of establishing a Jewish homeland in the
Land of Israel. As early as the 1880s, with the establishment of new Jewish settlements up in the Land of Israel, there began a rebellion against traditional Jewish names. It culminated with the Young Hebrews movement of the 1940s, but endured well after the birth of the State, even until today.\footnote{128}

The great Zionist onomastic revolution was part of the Movement’s commitment to the revival of the Hebrew language and marked the attempt to break with the image of the \textit{galuti} Jew. At the same time, in keeping with its secular, socialist underpinnings, the Zionist Movement also advocated equality/egalitarianism between the sexes. Against this backdrop, the question arises: how would the State of Israel relate to and affect the names of Jewish women in particular?

Of course, this question is too large and too complex to be dealt with in a few pages. Hence, the discussion that follows will attempt to raise some issues for discussion rather than produce composite, exhaustive answers. Firstly, the question of the mandatory Hebraization of names, including a review of the Israeli Names Law enacted in 1956 will be discussed. Secondly, the gendered nature of Israeli names adopted over the years will be explored. Finally, some recent developments in naming and \textit{halakha} will be described.

\textit{The Hebraization of Names}

The Zionist rebellion against traditional Jewish names that began in the late nineteenth century was ultimately integrated into national policy—the adoption of a Hebrew name was strongly promoted by the provisional government and later still by the government of the State of Israel, established in 1948.\footnote{129} The Zionist leaders even conspired to Hebraize the names of past leaders, such as Benjamin Zeev (Theodore) Herzl, and Ze’ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky. What of women?

On the whole, it appears as if, much like the institution of the religious name, the focus of this Hebrew name requirement was on Jewish men in particular. Even the means whereby the two respective policies excluded women were very similar. Thus, for example, just as the regulations regarding the \textit{shem kodesh} did not explicitly exclude women but simply required them only of those who participated in public religious ritual, that is, men; so too in the case of Hebrew names, the policy was not explicitly gendered. Instead, the official demand that personal names\footnote{130} be Hebraized...
was made of “the leaders of the nation, and its representatives, public electorates, government officials and heads of parties,” with special emphasis on those serving in the Israel Defense Forces, particularly in the higher levels, and the Foreign Service. There was also a case in which members of the Israeli soccer team were made to Hebraize their names before representing their country overseas. In other words, given that it was largely men who were representing Israel overseas, it is clear that the official name-changing policy would almost only affect men. What of the general populace? It was only in 1956 that the Israeli legislature finally set to work enacting the Israeli Names Law (hereinafter: the Law). In light of the declared Zionist commitment to the Hebraization of names on the one hand, and women’s equal rights on the other, this was the perfect opportunity to enact a law which would, for the first time, require not just males but also females to bear “a name in the Holy Tongue”

Certainly there were legal precedents for the intervention of the state. Several members of Knesset (MKs) participating in the parliamentary debate on the pending the passage of Israel’s Names Law in 1956 (hereinafter: the Law) expressly mentioned the examples of France and Germany and their demand for purely French or German names respectively. But not everyone was in favor of legally requiring the adoption of Hebrew names, and ultimately the legislature decided against it. The Minister of the Interior Yisrael Bar-Yehuda explained that, the newly enacted Law would concern itself not with the language or the content of names, nor with the rights that derived from them; rather, it was a procedural law. Accordingly, the Law declared, “Every person shall have … a first name” (as well as a surname) (sec. 2 (a)) and established that “A first name shall be given to a child by his parents immediately after birth.” The only limitation regarding the “content” of names was a general stipulation forbidding the registering of names (personal or family names) that are “likely to mislead or to infringe public policy or to offend the feelings of the public.” This limitation, however, was confined solely to requests for a change of name (sections. 10—26). Such name-changes would be permitted only once in seven years (sec. 11), and included parents’ changing the name of a
(minor) child—without court approval in the case of a first name (sec 13). Simply put, as Minister Bar-Yehuda explained, the Law was informed by the principle of limiting state intervention to the “strictly necessary” in the private sphere of personal names.\footnote{141}

In practice, particularly during the early years of the State’s existence, numerous cases of more or less coercive Hebraization of personal names occurred. In such cases, the “namers” were teachers, minor clerks, workers in absorption centers, airport officials, youth guides and even some well-meaning “veteran” Israelis who happened to encounter a naive new immigrant who did not have a Hebrew name.\footnote{142} As for the “newly named,” they tended to be Jewish immigrants from Arab countries—now known as \textit{Mizrahim}.\footnote{143} It follows that coercive name changing has been allied to ethnic discrimination in Israel.

Given this context, one can safely assume that an element of gender was involved as well. For example, it appears that in diametric opposition to the more official demands for the Hebraization of names, which appear to have affected more men than women, the more informal, \textit{coercive} name changes were imposed upon more girls than boys. A number of factors support this conjecture. Firstly, it was mainly girls who had foreign, non-Hebrew/\textit{Tanakhic} names in the first place. Secondly, more boys than girls tended to be named after family members, a factor that appears to have strengthened people’s resolve against a change of name.\footnote{144} Thirdly, throughout the ages, historians have discerned a general tendency to change more readily the names of girls and women rather than those of boys and men.\footnote{145}

Undoubtedly, the “coerced” Hebraization of names was generally well intentioned; it was widely believed that the Hebraization of names would assist in the absorption of new immigrants and the “in-gathering of the exiles.”\footnote{146} But studies have shown that \textit{coercive} name changes of new immigrants may increase the confusion and shock caused by the dislocation and the resettlement, and contribute to feelings of insecurity and sensitivity and a loss of identity.\footnote{147} Certainly, “changing a name by a member of an outside group, particularly when that group is socially dominant, will without question be severely resented.”\footnote{148}
Notwithstanding such findings and the criticism that was subsequently voiced against the arbitrary and coercive Hebraization of names in connection with the Great Aliya of the 1950s, the practice continued with the arrival of the first large wave of immigration of Ethiopian Jews in the 1980s. “The names of Ethiopian children were changed to mainstream Israeli names already at the airport or later in absorption centers, schools, kindergartens.” Once again, it appears that ethnic discrimination was at play, particularly in light of the fact that the Russian immigrants of the 1990s were generally not subject to the same coercive name-changing practices.

Thus, it is not surprising that recently, many members of the Ethiopian-Israeli community are choosing to “revive” their original Ethiopian names. These names are perceived to be an act of defiance towards the integrated society, as well as part of the process of strengthening identity and returning to one’s roots. The case is important -- it implies that in certain contexts, even as the Hebraization of names might mark a certain return to tradition, it also entails a break with more recent traditions and generations of ancestors. Given the history of Jewish name-giving, including the persistent tendency to make use of the concurrent vernacular especially in conjunction with women’s names, this reality must affect Jewish females more than males.

**Gender and Israeli Names**

As mentioned previously, with the advent of Zionism, the Jewish onomasticon, which had remained practically unchanged for 2,000 years, was finally opened up and enlarged. More specifically, Zionist ideology prompted two main developments in connection with the content of (Jewish) names: one was the rejection of Diaspora names; the other was their replacement with new names in accordance with the spirit of national revival.

As for the first, this meant not only striving to do away with the language of the gentiles, including their names, but also with their connotations of physical weakness, inferiority and victimization; in a word, *femininity*. Conversely, “Zionists took the lead in combating the anti-Semitic depiction of the male Jew by presenting a counter-image, the ‘New Jew,’ who was the mirror opposite of the anti-Semitic stereotype of the Jew [:] clearly and unabashedly a masculine creature.”
Certainly, the names the Zionists chose to replace the old Diaspora names would reflect this masculine-countering-feminine dynamic well. Most notably, for males there was a revival of Tanakhic names, particularly those denoting bravery and military prowess—a decided breakaway from the trends of former generations. The Tanakh, however, with its paucity of female names, did not hold the same naming opportunities for women. In addition, the Academy of the Hebrew Language held that female and male names ought to be immediately identifiable as such, thus cutting out the use of many of the “unidentified” Tanakhic names that might have been used for women.

This rule did, however, allow certain male Tanakhic names, like Aya and Bracha, to pass into female use. Furthermore, Israeli grammarians allowed the transforming of a male name into a female name through the addition of the appropriate feminine ending, although the opposite transformation was discouraged. Beyond these uses, however, the Tanakh offered little in the way of Hebrew names for women.

One result was that even in Israel, girls would have more vernacular names than do boys. More commonly, Hebrew names for girls were “invented”. Generally, whether by means of grammar rules or content, the new “made-up” girls names would clearly identifiable in terms of gender. As Lesley Hazleton wrote in her important book, Israeli Women: The Reality behind the Myths:

> Even the choice of Hebrew first names expresses clear role expectations. Those names that are not derived directly from the Bible often use biological symbolism. Thus men sometimes take the names of predatory animals (Dov—bear, Arieh—lion), and women of prey (Ayala—deer); men of trees (Oren—pine) and women of flowers and fruit (Shoshana—rose).

Today, even as the names popular in the 1970s have largely gone out of fashion, names still tend to be clearly separated according to gender. To be sure, some unisex names were always awarded now and then, and appear to have become more common in Israel over the years. Nonetheless, it appears that Israeli society still finds it easier to give unisex names to girls, rather than the other way around. As Cynthia Ozick has said, “prestige is always reduced when a lower caste is given access to it.”

Most significantly, girls’ names have seldom lasted longer than a generation. In other words, even as the Zionist movement led to widespread provision of Jewish girls with Hebrew names, other than the few traditional Tanakhic names for women, a
corpus of traditional Jewish girls’ names has yet to be established. In the attempt to explain this trend, one scholar has surmised: “Perhaps because religious identity is perceived as more ‘masculine,’ the changes in men’s names are more gradual.”

The last decade and a half has witnessed a certain “nominal” break with tradition in Israeli society. Specifically, beginning with the less traditional population groups (naming, like almost everything else in Israeli society, is highly sectarian), there has been an increase in the popularity in monosyllabic “new” names with a foreign ring, such as Tal, Gil, Dor, Or, Bar, Ben, Tom, and Dean. On the whole, researchers have found a greater tendency to innovation with regard to girls’ names than boys’ names. But Demsky emphasizes that many of these names are given to both girls and boys thus “reflecting the idea of equality.” If Demsky is right, it would be interesting to know if that would explain why only in the last few years have the “new/made-up” names caught the eye and interest of the legislature.

Specifically, in 2011 MKs Zevulun Orlev and Miri Regev proposed an Amendment to the Law which proposed the establishment of a Public Names Committee that would be called upon to decide if a given name is liable to cause public harm or harm to the child. The bill failed to pass even the first stage of legislation, but the suffering of children with offensive names was not entirely removed from the Knesset’s agenda. A few months later, MK Adi Kol proposed a bill, which became law, that would give children more agency in changing their names. The law does not apply to parents’ initial naming of their children but once a name has been granted, parents do not have the right to change a child’s name in a way that is hurtful to him/her, nor may they preventing a child from changing a hurtful name.

MK Kol explained to the Knesset that the Amendment was aimed at bringing the Law into line with Convention of the Rights of the Child, which Israel signed in 1991. Accordingly, the objective of the Names Bill is “to put the child in the center and to understand that one’s name is a hallmark of one’s identity, of one’s personality and parents cannot be allowed to change the child’s name in a sweeping manner without consulting him or worrying about his own good.” At this point, it is pertinent to refer to the Midrash that began this article and which declares, “People are called by
three names” but ends by remarking that, “the name a person acquires for him/herself is the best of all.”

Where Does Jewish Law Enter?
It is beyond the scope of this article to present a composite summary of halakha and baby naming. On the whole, it appears that much in the way of the State, so the rabbis have largely chosen to minimize interference in parents’ decisions as to what to name their children. This stance may be seen to be reflected in the diversity of names that have been given to Jewish babies over the years.\(^{175}\)

In other words, rather than sweeping and strict rules for ideal baby naming, the rabbis have preferred “recommendations” (although clearly these have more bearing among the more conservative religious groups). Such recommendations commonly include choosing a name that has positive meaning; is not strange or outlandish; is fitting for a righteous person; and is the name of someone who was known to be decent and upstanding. Naming after someone who was killed or who had a hard life is to be avoided, as is giving names in foreign languages, save for Yiddish or Ladino.\(^{176}\)

In addition, such recommendations are wont to include the non-provision of a boy with a girl’s name or a girl with a boy’s name.\(^{177}\) In one case, the writer explains that such nominal mingling of the sexes is liable to “cause a reversal in the reproductive channels.” He goes on to suggest that “if a daughter has already been named with a boy’s name and she experiences fertility problems or behaves indecorously, one may alter her name,” for example, by applying the appropriate grammatical rules in order to transform the name into the feminine form.\(^{178}\)

It is clear that recommendations such as these reflect a more conservative Jewish outlook. In this context, it is noteworthy that within the Haredi/ Ultra-Orthodox community, personal names are invested with huge importance.\(^{179}\) This is largely owing to the widespread custom of naming children after the spiritual leaders of the relevant sub-group. In this way, to some extent, personal names act as family names too.

In addition, children are frequently named after members of previous generations, which in the case of girls means that some Haredi girls are still being given Yiddish or “kosher-style” names of the kind discussed earlier.\(^{180}\) In most cases, however, the
names are Hebraized or otherwise altered to render them more modern sounding.\textsuperscript{181} It follows that even in this community, women’s names do not mark the connection between the generations in the way that men’s names do. Then again, the fact that more Haredi girls are being provided with Hebrew names does not appear to have had anything to do with the concept of the *shem kodesh* either.

To recall, the *shem kodesh* is the name assigned for use in religious practice, specifically for being “called up” to read from the Torah. In this respect, it is noteworthy that in a small but growing number of communities, including Orthodox ones such as *Shira Hadasha*, women are currently “called up” to the Torah. Moreover, the community explicitly strives to “make women’s Hebrew names visible and present in the public worship”\textsuperscript{182} by means of the public mentioning of their personal names in ritual generally and specifically, by inserting mothers’ names whenever an individual—man or woman—is called up to the Torah.

It has been repeatedly noted that no *halakhic* issue whatsoever seems to be in the way of such a move. Nonetheless, many (Orthodox) rabbis have strongly opposed including mother’s name when calling up congregants to the Torah, or when it comes to marriage documents and to tombstones. Hence, the inclusion of mothers’ names in religious contexts remains an ongoing struggle for Orthodox feminism.\textsuperscript{183}

8. Conclusions

“In our time, what will be said about the names that were given?” is the question MK Dvora Netzer posed to Israeli Knesset in 1956.\textsuperscript{184} Interestingly, centuries of Jewish history have produced exceedingly similar findings regarding the names of Jewish men and women. Whereas men’s names tend to line-up in long ongoing patrilineal formation, women’s names are somewhat fickle, subject to change from time to time and from place to place, discontinuing each other, if they are lucky enough to receive a mention at all.\textsuperscript{185}

During the course of this article, it has been argued that such findings regarding personal names are not a product of personal whims, but ought to be viewed as a function of the larger societal treatment of personal names. Specifically, the law—particularly Jewish law—has traditionally attributed more importance to the names of men, with the result being that the regulation of women’s names has been abandoned.
to the clutches of the arbitrary forces of fashion and fleeting social mores. In other words, it is submitted that these factors stepped in to “regulate” women’s names because the law stepped out, or, to repeat the conclusion of a fellow researcher, “Not novelty or fashion but economic and social inferiority paved the way for the easy acceptance of non-traditional names for women.”

There is, however, room for another view of Jewish women’s exemption from the rigid naming traditions of their male counterparts. Particularly when chosen by mothers, these names might be seen to manifest a rejection of the constrictions of tightly regulated naming, and thereby provide the possibility of transforming the “political” into the “personal.”

Such “political” use of names is a major tenet of Goitein’s analysis of his findings regarding women’s names in the Cairo Genizah, where the very content of the names lend themselves easily to such interpretation. For example, many of the names of daughters given by their mothers contain the term “sitt” (ruler), for example, “Ruler of Everyone” or “She Who Rules over the Turbans,” namely, over men. Other names describe the bearer as ruling the household, or the family, or even “Mankind.”

Goitein suggests that these names might reflect “the stirrings and aspirations of the women within the new civilization which matured in the Near Eastern and Mediterranean Islamic cities during the High Middle Ages” or constitute a sign of protest against their oppression, or an admonition to fight for leadership.

As for girl’s names such as “Cherished Gift” or “Good Luck,” Goitein remarks: “I suspect here a female protest against the male prejudice that only boys should be born, and that girls represented unfulfilled wishes, dashed hopes, and financial loss.” In a similar vein, he interprets the frequent appearance of unisex names in the Genizah documents: “These identical names of males and females,” he asserts, “probably demonstrate the proud mother’s contention that she did not care whether she had given birth to a boy or a girl. The same applies to feminine forms of male names, such as Maymuna, ‘God Auspice,’ paralleling Maymun, made famous through Maimonides.”

To be sure, not all agree with Goitein’s interpretation. Harvey Goldberg, for example, argues that the semantics of a name (given in translation) convey only a small part of
the overall context that makes a given name meaningful in a defined social situation. Then again, as Nadine Gordimer once said, “there are many forms of resistance not recognized in orthodox revolutionary strategy.”

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Endnotes

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2 See Walter Pintens and Michael R. Will, “Names,” in *4 International Encyclopedia of Comparative Law*, ch. 2 (Persons and Family), ed. Mary Ann Glendon (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 45–91: “More and more the connection between a name and its holder increases so much in importance that in most legal systems the name is considered to be a part of the personality.” But also noting the peculiar quality of names in that they “exist at the intersection of the ‘public’ and the ‘private.’” Ibid., 84 (213). Also see Gross, “Rights and Normalization,” 269, explaining how this paradoxical nature of names may lead to problems when, for instance, trying to define the right to a choice or change of name as a right of privacy. For a general discussion on the relation between naming, power, and law and its implications for feminism, see Omi Leissner, “The Problem that Has No Name,” *4 Cardozo Women’s L.J.* (1997-1998): 321, 323–32.

3 On the general dearth in research on names and on the particular dearth in research on women’s names, see Leissner, “Problem,” nn. 62–63. On the scarcity of *halakhic* sources dealing with the topic of names, see the discussion in Sara Munitz, “Jewish Customs and Laws Relating to Personal Names” (Unpublished MA thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 1989), 1–3 (in Hebrew).


5 Such a definition marks my attempt to avoid the problems of “periodization,” which, as Ivan G. Marcus wrote, “always difficult, is doubly so for Jewish history,” in “Jews in Western Europe: Fourth to Sixteenth Century,” in *Bibliographical Essays in Medieval Jewish Studies*, edited by Lawrence V. Berman (New York: Anti-defamation League of B’nai B’rith, 1976), 17, 19. In this article, I cannot entirely avoid the use of terms such as “the Middle Ages” or the “Enlightenment” or the “Modern Age,” however, I use the terms in a broad sense, allowing the sources themselves to define the limits in time and place.

Adam’s naming of the animals appears in *Genesis* 2. See Rella Israly Cohn, *Yiddish Given Names: A Lexicon* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2008), 1, for an interesting discussion on the difference between nouns and personal names.

On this question see, for example, Naomi G. Cohen, “Jewish Names as Cultural Indicators in Antiquity,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 7, no. 2 (1976): 97.

Examples include Atalya and Avichayil; see Arazi, *V’Ele Shmot Benei*, 157, 160. Dov Rosen, *P’soh li Shimkha* (*Tell Me Your Name*) (Jerusalem: S. Monzon, 1971), 129–30, and 170, brings examples of biblical unisex names, but he argues that these are “rare exceptions,” and that there never was a man and woman who bore the same name at the same time. But cf. Alice Laffey, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988) for a possible reason why there are apparently so few biblical unisex names.


See, for example, *Encyclopedia Judaica* 12, 806 (also citing Stamm, Rabinowitz, and Chazan, 16, where the question as to the reasons for the relative scarceness of theophoric women’s names is also raised). See also Rosen, *P’soh li Shimkha*, 169, who holds that even in modern times the theophoric ending should be retained for use as part of men’s names alone.

See, for example, M. Bitton, “Les Prenoms Feminins et Masculins Dans Les Declarations Des Juifs Comtadins de 1808,” *Revue des Etudes Juives*, 155, nos. 3–4 (1996): 421–4 arguing that Sarah is one of the few female biblical names with a prestigious meaning, i.e., princess; Arazi, *V’Ele Shemot*, 155. See also Munitz, “Jewish Customs,” 103, n. 74 mentioning women’s (biblical) names that have been cited by scholars as unsuitable as “good luck” names, namely, Rachel, Bat Sheva, Tamar, and Leah. The likely reason for these reservations appears to be the sad fortunes of these characters.
In his book, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns*, trans. Phyllis Hackett (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1987), 43, Moshe Garsiel remarks that, “The importance ascribed by ancient peoples to personal names is responsible for the creation of many [Midrashic name derivations].” The section that follows begins: “It is unnecessary to remark that it is on men’s [Midrashic name derivations] that the Bible concentrates,” 45.

Arazi, *V’Ele Shmot*, 167. Arazi (p. 156) also points out that whereas 610 of the male names have been in use over the generations, only eighty-four of the female names have been considered usable; See also Rosen, *P’soh li Shikma*, 77. On the greater implications of the omission of women’s names in the biblical genealogical lists, see J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives* (Sheffield: Bloomsbury, 1998), 111–12.


Ora Schwarzwald, “First Names in Sephardi Communities,” in *Pleasant Are the Names: Jewish Names in the Sephardi Diaspora*, ed. Aaron Demsky (Bethesda, MD: University of Maryland Press, 2010, 197. See also the examples she brings there.

Laffey, *Introduction*, 12–13, discussing Israelite history as men’s history: “Time itself is recorded in generations: from father to son. Furthermore, when a census was taken (e.g., Num 1-4; 26; 32) it numbered the men—the heads of tribes, clans and families.” See also Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 111 (“An extremely effective strategy by which the Genesis narrators establish the paternal claim to offspring is by omitting women’s names in genealogical lists .... To read the genealogical lists in the Bible, one would think the men did not need wives to reproduce”). Cf. Leissner, “Problem,” 340, text accompanying n. 104, on how women cannot use indications such as II, Sr. and Jr.—“females are not regarded as part of a dynasty.”


Laffey, *Introduction*, 13–15 and 76–78. Also on the matter of generic terms, note that the Bible (and the Hebrew language) uses the term isha both for the generic meaning of “woman” (Gen 2:22–23) and also for “wife” (Gen 4:1). Another exception to patriarchal bias appears in Proverbs—instead of using the generic masculine noun to subsume females under males, Prov 29:15 uses “mother” when the more generic “parent” is implied. This is the only example of “female by preference” in the texts (ibid., 198–200).

See Ex 6:14 and *Bava Batra* 109b (“The father’s family is called a family: the mother’s family is not called a family”) Also note that Eliezer Berkovits, in his book *Jewish Women in Time and Torah* (New Jersey: KTAV, 1990), narrates a *midrash* which relates the Hebrew ben (son) to the verb banah, which means “to build.” He explains how, at that time, only men could be “world builders,” adding that “[w]orld-builders are, of course, also family-builders, and that is why a family is called
after the father and not after the mother” (ibid., 3, citing Rashi, quoting Midrash Tanhuma, 11). See also Carol Meyers, Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 179–81, who explains that beit em (mother’s house) is a rare term in the Bible, the exception appearing in Song of Songs.

Levirate marriage (yibbum) constitutes the law concerning the duty of one’s brother to perpetuate the name of the deceased childless brother (Deut 25:5–10). Note, however, that according to S. Bendor, The Social Structure of Ancient Israel: The Institution of the Family (Beit ’ab) from the Settlement to the End of the Monarchy; Jerusalem Biblical Studies, vol. 7 (Jerusalem: Simor, 1996), 106, in the Tanakh the term “the name” did not have the modern meaning but rather held comprehensive juridical-social import in connection with a kinship unit, property, and inheritance (or part of it), or with name/memory/seed/progeny. “The name” in the juridical-social sense, as a unit of kinship/property/inheritance, appears in many cases related to the nuclear unit within the beit av (ibid., 124–28, citing the example of yibbum, Deut 25:5–10); see also BT. Yevamot 24a and YT. Yevamot 2:10a—that the meaning is not the actual name, but the nachala (property, inheritance). See also Raphael Patai, Francis Lee Utley, and Dov Noy, Studies in Biblical and Jewish Folklore (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), 92–93.

It is necessary to state, however, that even in biblical times “progress” towards women’s inheritance rights was made in the story of the daughters of Zelophad (Num 27:1–11; and 360). But, as Meyers, Discovering Eve, 40, remarks: “Females can inherit property, but even this breach in the normal pattern is handled in such a way as to preserve the principle of transferring name and property to succeeding generations according to the father’s line.” See also Alice Ogden Bellis, Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women’s Stories in the Hebrew Bible (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 108: “This story [of the daughters of Zelophad] could be heard even in ancient Israel as a story of comfort for women who would not be left destitute, but it was preserved primarily as a story of comfort for men who had the misfortune not to bear any male heirs—their names would not be cut off from their clans.”

Jacques Gelis, History of Childbirth: Fertility, Pregnancy, and Birth in Early Modern Europe, trans. Rosemary Morris (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 206, 208 (“The real and symbolical inheritance of the family must be passed on according to the rules, and the forename was one element in it.”).


Aaron Demsky, “Jewish Women’s Names: A Historical Perspective,” *JOFA (Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance)* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 1. But see this pertinent comment of my anonymous reviewers: “From a linguistic point of view, most proper names in the past are not derived as Hebrew nouns.”

“Most of Israel, outside the land of Israel, have pagan names . . .” *Gittin* 11a; or “New names were brought from Babel...” *Tehilim* 48:9.

*Mekhilta D’Rabi Yishamel, Mechilta Pischa* V and Lev. R. 32:5. For a discussion of these sources, see Munitz, “Jewish Customs,” 69–77.

It is unclear, however, exactly when this addition was made (ibid., 69). The *midrash* in the *Mechilta* was the basis of *Piutei Yanai L’Chag HaPesach*, and researchers debate whether it was permitted to translate the Hebrew name into the vernacular or whether it was only a change of name that was prohibited. Whatever the case, “these utterances seem to have been directed against those who by changing their names or calling their children by foreign names would seek to deny their Jewish identity, and not against the foreign names as such,” Jacob Lauterbach, “The Naming of Children in Jewish Folklore, Ritual and Practice,” *CCAR Yearbook* 42 (1932): 1, 19; see also Arazi, *V’Ele Shemot*, 108.

Ibid., 155, mentions the examples of Marta, Schapira, and Babata, but emphasizes that this did not mean that Hebrew names were no longer given to Jewish women at all, and brings examples such as Imashalom, the sister of Raban Gamliel; Rachel, the wife of Rabbi Akiva; Bruria, the wife of Rabbi Meir, and Re’uma, the sister of the Amorai Abaye.


The (family) names that qualify her and her husband are only those of men: their fathers, *Gittin*, 85:b, *Shulkhan Aruch*, 129:9, cited in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 5, *Get*, 624, n. 892. For more on this topic, see Omi Leisner, “Jewish Women’s Families’ Names: A Feminist Legal Analysis,” *Israel Law Review* 34, no. 4 (2000): 560, section 3. In addition, even though the bride’s name is written on the document, she, in contrast to the groom and the two witnesses, is not required to actively sign her name—a fact which might have contributed in the past to greater illiteracy among Jewish women than men. See, for example, Adolf Kober, “Jewish Names in the Era of Enlightenment,” *Historica Judaica* 5 (1943): 178, stating that many of the Jewish women in West Germany (1808) could not even sign their names.
Strictly speaking, this could be said of men’s names, too. In reality, however, numerous halakhic discussions can be found on questions such as: when is a newborn boy to be named? Under what circumstances is his naming to be delayed? What name can be considered a fitting name for a Jewish boy? Who has the primary right to name him, and after whom should he be named? By what name is he to be called to read from the Torah? And so on. Few of these questions are asked in connection with baby girls. For more on these questions, see Omi Leissner, “Jewish Women’s Naming Rites and the Rights of Jewish Women,” *Nashim* 4 (2001): 140.

*BT Gittin*, 34a; although Arazi, *V’Ele Shemot*, 155, mentions only Sarah; Sarah has remained one of the most popular biblical names among Jewish women, see, for example, Bitton, “Les Prenoms Feminins,” 444, and regarding Medieval France, 427 and 444; also stating that Miriam (as well as Esther) has also long been popular.


Ibid., 192, in this case Mariamne and Salome.


It appears that these names were thought to be endowed with a special holiness that was not attributed to the relations of other “fathers,” e.g., Yitzhak, Yaakov, Eliezer, Elazar, Pinhas, and some of Yaakov’s sons. See the following examples of prominent rabbis: David (850), Shlomo (750), Avraham (750), Eliyahu (eleventh century), Yisrael (fourteenth century, in Germany). Arazi, *V’Ele Shemot*, 102, but adding that we don’t really know what the masses did because research is based on “ketuvim” (written documentation).

Munitz, “Jewish Customs,” 68; Lauterbach, “Naming of Children,” 31. See also Cohn, *Yiddish Given Names*, 48—the restriction was never total and it eased at the beginning of the Jewish Enlightenment.

On the controversy generally, see, for example, Munitz, “Jewish Customs,” 32–34; Meir Amsaal, “Birur Shezchut Kriat Shem LaYeled HaRishon Shayakh L’Em HaYeled,” *HaMaor* 24, no. 1 (1972): 10; Lauterbach, “Naming of Children,” 78; Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York: Behrman’s Jewish Book House, 1939), 78; Hayyim...

46 Leissner, “Naming Rites,” 150–4. See also discussion in Cohn, Yiddish Given Names, 36–39.
47 Avraham Stahl, Mitzvah Hashemot (The Origins of Names) (Ohr Yehuda: Dvir, 2005), 36.
48 S. D. Goitein, A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967–88), 319, but adding that a few names demonstrated “rare longevity.” It is noteworthy that a few new Hebrew names were coined for Jewish daughters among the Italian Jews and Sephardic communities generally—Kaganoff, Dictionary of Jewish Names, 55. See also Howard Adelman, “Italian Jewish Women,” in Jewish Women in Historical Perspective, ed., Judith Baskin (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 135, 142–3 (Medieval Italian women were often known by their Italian names, but they usually had Hebrew names as well.); citing Cecil Roth, The Jews in the Renaissance (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1959), 47. But see Schwarzwald, “First names,” 198: “A high number of foreign female first names were used in Sephardi communities.”
49 Ibid.; cf. Michael Adler, “The Jewish Woman in Medieval England,” in Jews of Medieval England, ed. Michael Adler (London: The Jewish Historical Society of England, 1939), 20–21 (the majority of Jewish women in medieval England were given purely Norman-French names); Schauss, Lifetime of a Jew, 44; Ivan Marcus, “Mothers, Martyrs, and Moneymakers: Some Jewish Women in Medieval Europe,” Conservative Judaism 38, no. 3 (1986): 34, 40, where Marcus writes that “It is a characteristic of medieval Jewish women that many had vernacular names,” with reference to the names of the wife and daughters of R. Eleazar ben Judah of Worms who were murdered in 1197; see also Binyamin Shlomo Hamburger, “The Giving of the Cradle Name: Hol Kreisch,” in Shorshe Minhag Ashkenaz (Bnei Brak: Machon Moreshet Ashkenaz, 1995), 415, 433, regarding the women of the generation of the Rishonim; Bitton, “Les Prenoms Feminins,” regarding the Jews of France both before (p. 424) and after the Emancipation (pp. 437–445); similar findings regarding Medieval France were made by Simon Seror, Les noms des juifs de France au Moyen Age (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la Recherche scientifique, 1989). For similar findings in the Sephardi world, see e.g. Dobrinski, Treasury of Sephardic Laws and Customs (cited by Arazi, V’Ele Shemot, 27).
50 Cf. Juliana de Luna (Julie Smith), re: the names of women in the Cairo Geniza: “The names are mostly Arabic, even though most were rendered in Hebrew letters. This reflects the broader trend in the Middle Ages: Jewish women generally used names typical of the culture in which they lived, while men generally used biblical names or names that were the vernacular equivalents of religious names…..”
51 Cohn, Yiddish Given Names, 2. It is noteworthy that Hebrew/Aramaic, the liturgical language and the language of the sacred texts, is termed in Yiddish loshn-kodesh “holy tongue,” while one of the names for Yiddish is mame-loshn “mother tongue” (Ibid., 24).

53 Kaganoff, Dictionary of Jewish Names, 55–56.

54 But see Cohn, Yiddish Given Names for a more recent and thorough discussion of Yiddish names, including criticism of Kaganoff’s book, Dictionary of Jewish Names, 7–9.

55 Judith Romney Wegner, Chattel or Person: The Status of Women in the Mishnah (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 175–80 (also citing Jacob Neusner, Method and Meaning in Ancient Judaism [Chicago: Scholars Press, 197], 96–97). A good example of this duality may be seen in the analysis by Bitton of the names chosen by French Jews following the 1808 Napoleonic law: on the one hand, many more men’s names registered were biblical names, which served to affirm the Jewish identity of their bearers (Bitton, “Les Prenoms Feminins,” 424, 441); on the other hand, if the Revolution did have an influence on Jews’ names, it was on the names of men (ibid., 445). For an alternative description of Jewish women’s position on the margins of both Jewish and non-Jewish society, see Marion A. Kaplan, “Gender and Jewish History in Imperial Germany,” in Assimilation and Community: The Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe, ed. J. Frankel and S. J. Zipperstein (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 199, 202: “Although painfully aware of their position in a society increasingly intolerant of heterogeneity, most Jewish women saw no conflict between being German while retaining their religious or cultural legacy. They mixed their Jewish heritage and contemporary German bourgeois practice, to create a form of social life—of ethnic culture—which was not a way-station en route to homogenization but a balance between integration and identity” (p. 202).

56 In light of the dearth of (official) Jewish names bestowed upon Jewish women in the Middle Ages, it is somewhat ironic that many of the contemporaneous Jewish authors, who tended to be highly influenced by the misogynist tendencies of the surrounding Christian as well as Islamic cultures, were wont to call their despised Jewish female characters by Hebrew biblical names, so as to lend the story a camouflage of Jewishness. Judith Dishon, “Images of Women in Medieval Hebrew Literature,” in Women of the Word: Jewish Women and Jewish Writing, ed. Judith R. Baskin (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 35, 39.

57 Arazi, V’Ele Shemot, 166; Kaganoff, Dictionary of Jewish Names, 55–56; Ha-Levi, “Jewish Naming Convention,” 3. But note the interesting dynamic in connection with so-called ornamental names—such names were characteristically found among Jewish women, but they were also a popular choice of surname—among the Jewish minorities of Europe, for example, Rosenthal, Diamond, Gold.
See Alexander Beider, “Jewish Patronymic and Metronymic Surnames in Russia,” Avotaynu 7, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 12–15, discussing the connection between the two in “the beautiful semantics of the words from which the names and the surnames were formed. Semantics always affected the parental choice of a given name for girls, not only among Jews, but also among other ethnic groups. This in turn very much affected the choice of Jewish surnames at the beginning of the 19th century.”

From Arazi, V’Ele Shemot, 166

That is, the stock (and hence variety) of women’s names was greatly reduced compared to that of their male counterparts, e.g., Bitton, “Les Prenoms Feminins,” 428–37 (regarding the Jews of Medieval France, also showing how there tended to be more variants of the same name for women, p. 435); Polonovski, “Adoption and declaration,” 53 (homogenization and diminution in variety is evident in feminine first names); Bornstein-Makovetsky, “Jewish Names in Istanbul,” 15 (regarding the Jews, especially the Jewish women, of Istanbul, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries); and see Gaimani, “Names of Jewish Women,” 52. See also Cohn’s Yiddish Given Names: “There are 146 men’s names and 110 women’s names in the corpus. The large number of men’s names may reflect the shem hakodesh and kinnui combination,” 65.

See also ibid.: “Monosyllabic names are masculine,” 66.


The “secular” names of men were usually in Yiddish or Ladino (Arazi, V’Ele Shemot, 133, also discussing the various techniques for translating names into Yiddish); or it was the diminutive of a Tanakhic name (Yam Shel Shlomo, Gittin, ch. 4, s. 20; Hamburger, “Cradle Name,” 446; Kaganoff, Dictionary of Jewish Names, 50; Alexander Beider, A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Russian Empire (New Haven, CT: Avotaynu, 1993), 5; or a name for good luck (shem sgula) (according to Yehiel Gedalya Gomperetz, “Kriat Shemot B’Yisrael,” Tarbiz 25 (1956): 340, 452, 463, the majority of vernacular names for Jewish men were of this type); or a name in the local tongue but which only Jews tended to hold (Bering, The Stigma of Names, 73, citing that, for example, some German animal names were used almost solely by Jews).


Paula E. Hyman, Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995). See also the section entitled Gender and Israeli Names below.

Arazi, V’Ele Shemot, 133–4; Kaganoff, Dictionary of Jewish Names, 50–55; Hamburger, “Cradle Name,” 416 (citing, inter alia, HaMaharshal, Yam Shel Shlomo, Gittin, ch. 4, s. 20; and the Rosh); Ha-Levi, “Jewish Naming Convention,” 3, discussing different ways of forming a kinnui (cradle name) in relation to the religious name.
Another example which illustrates how providing official status to the names of only part of the population may act to demean the actual names of others may be found in quite another place and time—America during the period of slavery: “As with white women, slave names were often nicknames or diminutives of white names, for example, Will for William and Betty for Elizabeth. Although a white youth might be called by a nickname such as Tom, on legal documents and in adulthood, however, white men claimed the distinction granted by the formal version of their names,” cited and discussed in Omi Leissner, “Naming the Unheard of,” National Black Law Journal 15, no. 1 (1997): 123.

In contrast to the “shem kodesh,” the “shem khol” (called the “surname” by Zunz, Namen der Juden, cited by Kober, “Jewish Names,” 168) was to be used by the person in civil-secular activities, and was to be the name used by his family, friends, and acquaintances. See Shut Maharam Mintz, s. 37; Shimon Ginsburg, Minhangim B’Yiddish, 5 Brit Mila (1779) cited by Hamburger, “Cradle Name,” 447. The distinction (largely) remains in place to this day, ibid., 447. If there is a desire to give a shem khol at the brit mila, it must be preceded by the term hamechuneh (“will be known as”), in order to distinguish between the two—Yosef Hacohen Oppenheimer, Kontres ‘Vayikra Shmo B’Yisrael’ – Minhagei Kriyat Shmot L’Yeladim (Buenos Aires: S-P, 1974), 44, citing Shut Hatam Sofer and Sefer HaBrit. See also discussion in Cohn, Yiddish Given Names, 4–5, 40–43.

Kober, “Jewish Names,” 168 (citing Zunz, Namen Der Juden). For the religious definition of the “shem kodesh,” see n. 79 below. According to Schauss, Lifetime of a Jew, 44 (“from the 13th century, the Jews of Europe made the distinction between the Jewish name given at the brit mila for religious purposes, and the non-Jewish name for secular purposes”) According to Kaganoff, Dictionary of Jewish Names, 49, this change took place in the twelfth century. But note, according to Schauss, Lifetime of a Jew, 44, “the Jews of the Orient sufficed with a non-Jewish name alone, for religious rituals as well”; Arai, V’Ele Shemot, 127, also discusses the enormous influence of Arabic on the names of the Jews living in those countries, but he maintains that in the case of males, as opposed to females, they did also carry separate names for religious purposes.

Avraham Yitzhak Shperling, Taamei HaMinhagim U’Mekorei HaDinim (Lvov: David Roth, 1928), 397, cites Mishnat HaHasidim in the name of the Ari; also discussed in Lauterbach, “Naming of Children,” 28.

Kaganoff, Dictionary of Jewish Names, 49; Schauss, Lifetime of a Jew, 44; Lauterbach, “Naming of Children,” 33–34.


Amsaal, “Birur Shezchut Kriat Shem,” 10 (consequently, the brit mila earned the official presence of a rabbi); Hamburger, “Cradle Name,” 415, 416, 447. Even if a Jewish boy did not receive a
Jewish name at his circumcision, the officiating reader was instructed to provide him with one at the time of being called up to read from the Torah, ibid., 447–48, citing Minhagei Kriat HaTorah Shel Rabi Shlomo Zalman Geiger (1832–1877), Divrei Kohelet (1862), 45:1; and Shut Divre Yosef, s. 16. A convert will be called up as “the son of Avraham”—Munitz, “Jewish Customs,” 76.

74 See, for example, Hamburger, “Cradle Name,” 433; Schauss, Lifetime of a Jew, 44; Kaganoff, Dictionary of Jewish Names, 50; Bitton, “Les Prenoms Feminins,” 424–5, and Seror, Les Noms Des Juifs 13; Bornstein-Makovetsky, “Jewish Names in Istanbul,” 13, 16. Women’s systematic exclusion from public religious ritual may be seen as responsible not only for the fact that fewer Jewish women were given Jewish names in the first place, but it would also serve as an encumbrance when it became necessary to ascertain a woman’s official, legal name. See, for example, Benyamin Noyzitch, ed., Sefer Konderisin, Hilchot Gittin (Dinei Kitvat Shemot) (Jerusalem: Mifal Torat Ashkenaz, 1998), s. 10:4, emphasizing that while for a woman, the name to be written in the get (divorce writ) is the name she is known by, for a man it is always the name that is used to call him up to read the Torah and for signing documents.


76 Later, during the Reformation, the question of Christian names became an important (political) issue (because of Lutheran and Calvinist opposition to the Catholic custom of naming after saints, and the preference for names of figures from the Old Testament). It was only in the sixteenth century, however, that the Church issued an official decree regarding baptismal names. See, for example, W. G. Naphy, “Baptisms, Church Riots and Social Unrest in Calvin’s Geneva,” Sixteenth Century Journal 26, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 87–97. See also Gelis, History of Childbirth, 206–12 on the relation between the Church, its directives, and the de facto names of the people.

77 Hamburger, “Cradle Name,” 433: “There was no insistence on giving a girl a secular name in particular.” Actually, by the same token, one might say that there was never an explicit directive to give Jewish boys a shem kodesh. However, indirect rulings, such as that requiring use of the shem kodesh for all religious rituals, or the special prayers set out for the naming of a boy at his circumcision, ensured that “it is not the way of [Jewish] people to give their sons anything but a shem lashon hakodesh [a name in the Holy tongue] at his circumcision”—Hilchot Gittin, s. 10:5.

78 Hamburger, “Cradle Name,” 446, citing R. Shlomo Luria HaMaharshal, Yam Shel Shlomo, Gittin, IV, s. 20.

79 Goitein, Mediterranean Society, 315. cf. Gaimani, “Names of Jewish Women,” 62. Most of the names given to women in Yemen were Arabic, with a minority coming from Jewish sources “as practiced in Oriental Jewish communities.”

80 Gila Hadar, “Name-giving Patterns for Girls and Women in the Judeo-Spanish Diaspora (Salonika 1492-1943),” in Pleasant Are Their Names: Jewish Names in the Sephardi Diaspora, ed. Aaron Demsky (Bethesda, MD: University of Maryland Press, 2010), 209.
81 Ibid., 228 and 211: “The name given to the son was meaningful in indicating continuity of family and people”. Most pertinently, Hadar reveals that “What characterized the birth of a daughter in the Sephardi Diaspora was silence—a brief moment of quiet.”

82 Ibid., 217 (discussing tombstones from the sixteenth century).

83 Gelis, History of Childbirth, 207.


85 Kober, “Jewish Names,” 166–7. These name decrees were promulgated in the European and particularly the German states which were occupied by France. For a chronological list of decrees concerning the names of the Jews found in the Emancipation laws or in special statutes from 1789–1852, as well as a full list as compiled by Silberstein, see Kober, “Jewish Names,” n. 6. See also Bering, The Stigma of Names, 29; Kaganoff, Dictionary of Jewish Names, 22; and Arthur Kurzweil, From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Personal History (rev. ed.; New York: Harpercollins, 1994), 241.

86 Bering, The Stigma of Names, 18; Encyclopedia Judaica, 12, 809.

87 On name-changing as an attempt to escape persecution see, for example, Hamburger, “Cradle Name,” 451 (citing Pele Yoetz, 75–77 and Max Finkel, “To my dear children” (New York, NY: Max Finkel, 1992), 14); Bering, The Stigma of Names, 22–23 (fellow Jews failed to appreciate the pressures to which Jews were exposed as demonstrated by the strong move of name-change (ibid., 13, 16) and the Zionists criticized the ousting of Hebrew names as spineless. See also Ernest Maass, “Integration and Name-changing among Jewish Refugees from Central Europe in the United States,” Names 6, no. 3 (1958): 129, 139–40 (occasionally Jewish judges failed to approve a name change when they suspected that the applicant wished to hide his Jewishness).

88 See, for example, Bitton, “Les Prenoms Feminins,” 424 and 441, regarding France, and Bering, The Stigma of Names, 37, regarding Prussia-Germany (in choosing their names, the vast majority of Berlin Jews around 1812 proposed to retain as far as possible the tradition of their forefathers). Also note that often anti-Semitic governments prevented Jews from escaping their Jewish names totally (ibid., 267). See also Albert Memmi, The Liberation of the Jew, trans. Judy Hyun (New York: Orion Press, 1966), 39, remarking on how Jews always did a half-job “to remain Jewish, but not too Jewish; to loosen the link with the self, but not too much.”

89 See Hamburger, “Cradle Name,” 450–1 and cites therein.

90 In the French context, for example, in 8,000 declarations regarding women’s names, 835 “old pet” names were replaced by 344 “modern” French ones; see Polonovski, “Adoption and declaration,” 53. Kober, “Jewish Names,” 177 (the old pet names of women in particular were changed, whereby first names such as Antoinette, Babette, Caroline, Francoise, Jeanne, Madeleine, Margarit, and Rosine
were introduced); see also Bitton, “Les Prenoms Feminins,” 437–45. D. Hertz, “Leaving Judaism for a Man: Female Conversion and Intermarriage in Germany 1812-1819,” in Zur Geschichte der Judischen Frau in Deutschland, ed. Julius Carlebach (Berlin: Metropol, 1993), 184 (regarding Jewish women living in Berlin in the late eighteenth century); Sol van Son, Avotaynu, 62 (1990): 27, report of an eighteenth-century Dutch-Jewish family where first names of girls were changed in documents from Yiddish to Dutch forms. Other changes are also mentioned.

91 Shut Hatam Sofer, EE, 22:38; Shut Mahram Shik, EE, s. 109; HaMalbim, Avnei Chen (Europe, nineteenth century) regarding Gen 48:16. See also Oppenheimer, Kontres ‘Vayikra Shmo B’Yisrael’, 27, who brings Rishonim as well as statements from the Gemara, as to this prohibition. He explains why the Rambam and Ramban had Gentile names—because they did not do so “in order to be like the non-Jews.”

92 Meir Yeushzan Lahman, Mearzenu HaYasahan, Bereshit, 261.

93 So, too, objections to the provision of unisex names began to appear at this time. See Lauterbach, “Naming of Children,” 29 (stating that some authorities object to the practice of giving a boy the name of a girl, and vice versa, citing Moses Konitz, Sefer Hametzaref I, no. 86 (Vienna, 1820), 56, but adding that nonetheless this was done in Talmudic, medieval, and modern times. Regarding the analogy with clothes, see Shut Divre Malchiel (R. Malchiel Tannenbaum, Part III, s. 75, Eastern Europe, twentieth century); see also Oppenheimer, Kontres ‘Vayikra Shmo B’Yisrael’, 30; Rosen, P’soh li Shimkha, 27.

94 Dobrinski, Treasury of Sephardic Laws and Customs, 4.

95 Cited in Hamburger, “Cradle Name,” 449. Hamburger cites the Hatam Sofer, who talks of the gravity of the phenomenon of the adoption of vernacular names using examples of women: Shut Hatam Sofer, EE, II, s. 38. In this case, the discussion revolves around a woman whose “cradle name” is Lvia, but in keeping with common practice of changing the cradle name to a gentile name, she was known to all, and signed herself Lani.

96 Hamburger, “Cradle Name,” 450 cites Shut Yad HaLevi, part 1, EE, s. 56.

97 Yaakov Kopel Halevy Baumberger, “Tshuva Binyan Ktivat Shmot Nashim Bgittin (Warshama 1784–1864),” Shomer Tezon HaNeeman, 138, no. 9 (1853): 274, the question concerned the name to be used for the shtar gittin.


99 Bering, The Stigma of Names, 39. It was in the attempt to fight one such ban (from 1836) that the Jews commissioned Leopold Zunz who wrote Namen der Juden. In the book, Zunz showed that from the earliest age Jews, and even more frequently Jewish women, had adopted foreign names (p. 69). Jewish women were even wont to have the name “Mariane,” a name straight from Christian dogma (p. 73).

100 Though there was nothing new about anti-Semitism per se, it reappeared in a new guise such that the majority of historians think it no longer appropriate to speak of the old anti-Semitic hostility to
Jews, but of “modern anti-Semitism.” Modern anti-Semitism is seen to have begun with the stock market crash at the beginning of the 1870s, and the “Berlin movement” (from 1879) under Chaplain Adolf Stoeker. In addition, public awareness was increasingly influenced by Darwinism: the Jews were viewed as a worthless, inferior race. See, generally, Bering, The Stigma of Names, 87–89.

Bering, The Stigma of Names, 33, 83. See also Memmi, Liberation of the Jew, 33, discussing “the anger of the non-Jew when faced with the camouflage of a Jew,” and the desire to “pierce the mask.”

Bering, The Stigma of Names, 16, 90–91, adding that in order to carry out the “branding process,” “a certain feat of repression was required of the rejecting majority which had to disregard the fact that it too contained the bearers of such names” (p. 196). See the summary of chronological events on pp. 280–2. For a personal account of name anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany, see Werner Cohn, “The Name Changers,” Forum 50 (1983): 65–66.

Bering, The Stigma of Names, chs. 17, 18, 19 generally; also on (Jewish) women’s exclusion from the marketplace in nineteenth-century Germany, see M. A. Kaplan, Tradition and Transition: The Acculturation, Assimilation and Integration of Jews in Imperial Germany: A Gender Analysis (New York, NY: Leo Baeck Institute, 1982), 204–5.

Bering, The Stigma of Names, chs. 18 and 19 generally. The number of requests by women rose when women finally came to be admitted to the marketplace in Germany. Cf. name-change requests beginning in the late nineteenth century by Eastern European Jews who had immigrated to the U.S. were also made mainly by males; Arthur Scherr, “Change-of-Name Petitions of the New York Courts: An Untapped Source in Historical Onomastics,” Names 34 (1986): 284, 292–9.

Bering, The Stigma of Names, 70; “Jewish—like German—families were quicker to release their female descendants from the constraint of traditional names... Such facts must not be forgotten when it comes to assessing the depth of offence caused by attacks on names, men’s names afforded an optimum of destruction.”

Ibid. The forename was thereby particularly charged, so much so that scholars showed a tendency to compare such cases of naming after-with the bestowal of titles, n. 17.

Ibid., 177–8. It follows that official requests for a change of forename were generally granted as long as recognizability as Jews was ensured, n. 17. Sixty-three percent of forename applications were granted (generous compared to 57.4 percent of surnames), but 103 of the names were granted only as an addition to an old one.

This was not true of Germany alone: on November 17, 1890, the governor of St. Petersburg, who loved to taunt Jews, passed an ordinance according to which signs be placed on Jewish owned stores and workshops which had to indicate the family name as well as the full forename plus the father’s name in the exact spelling (as they appeared on the passport), the aim being to enable the Christian public to boycott Jewish stores as well as to poke fun at the names of owners. In several
cities, police took severe measures against Jews for adopting Christian names in newspaper adverts, in writing cards, or on door signs, Kober, “Jewish Names,” 170–1.

In other words, regulations regarding changes of surnames were made applicable to forenames too, first by a ruling of the Prussian Supreme Court in September 1897 and subsequently by law; see ibid., 102.

Bering, The Stigma of Names, 113. In 1903, the right of Jews to change their names on conversion to the Christian religion was annulled; in 1904, a change of first name was also made dependent on ministerial permission in the case of Jews (April 11). By 1908, even contracts of adoption were to be declared null and void if it was found that their sole aim was the acquisition of an unsuspicious name. Following World War II, there was a short period in which there was some liberalization in the law of names. In practice, such liberalization was taken by anti-Semites as proof of Jewish infiltration into government and the polemics against Jews ever-increased, ibid., 132.

The number of men who chose to change their names via the process of baptism remained consistently higher than the number of women. Kaplan, “Imperial Germany,” 216. One exception to this rule was the “salon years,” i.e., the last two decades of the eighteenth century, when female conversion and outmarriage overtook male rates; see Hertz, “Leaving Judaism for a Man,” 131–2. But where it appears that the major motivation for male conversion was professional, it appears that the rate of women’s conversion increased at this time because of their increased opportunities to marry gentiles—until 1874 there was no civil marriage in Prussia (ibid.). Also note that the number of women converting rose as well when they entered the marketplace, Kaplan, “Imperial Germany,” 216.

Robert M. Rennick, “The Nazi Name Decrees of the Nineteen Thirties,” Names 18 (1970): 65, 75, citing sec. 7 of RGB1 P. 9; see also Bering, The Stigma of Names, 144 (all compulsory reversals had to be completed by December 31, 1940. In all, 368 cases of change were tracked down in 1938–39).

Second Decree for the Enforcement of the Name Law (August 17, 1938) (RGB1 IP. 1044), cited and discussed in ibid., 76–77, and Bering, The Stigma of Names, 145. The ruling came into force on January 1, 1939. According to the guidelines (RMB1 ivp.1345) any child born after January 1, 1939 had to receive such a name. Similar laws were subsequently enacted under the influence of the Nazis in Austria, the Sudetan-German areas, Italy, Vichy France, Norway, and Sweden. Rennick, “Nazi Name Decrees,” 86–87 stated, however, that in Sweden an order was passed not to observe the “discriminatory law.” The law was finally cancelled in September 1947; Kaganoff, Dictionary of Jewish Names, 67.

Bering, The Stigma of Names, n. 23. Hitler’s handwritten corrections to the list have been preserved.

There were ninety-one women’s names. It is noteworthy that the Nazis also required a distinction between the names of (non-Jewish) men and women; Rennick, “Nazi Name Decrees,” 70,
citing Wallace R. Deuel, *People under Hitler* (London: Drummond, 1942), 143. Additional names legislation directed solely at women concerned wives’ adoption of their husbands’ surnames—for a discussion of these, see section 4 of Leissner, “Jewish Women’s Families’ Names,” 560.

117 Bering, *The Stigma of Names*, 145, n. 22. The ruling contained a penal clause which prevented the abbreviation of this tag.

118 Rennick, “Nazi Name Decrees,” 76; Bering, *The Stigma of Names*, 145, n. 23.

119 The names appeared in Yiddish spelling in order to emphasize their strangeness, ibid., 76, n. 30, 77.

120 Bering, *The Stigma of Names*, 145, citing a newspaper from September 2, 1938. The article went on to say that, “The completion of this identification also admittedly requires that, conversely, children of German nationals are on principle only given German first names in the future.” Cf., according to Rennick, the Nazi name laws should be seen as part of the larger Nazi policy concerning names. In 1938, Hitler’s Interior Ministry passed a series of orders limiting the choice of names of the citizens of the Reich and regulating the way in which names could be changed. The underlying principle was that a person’s name should act as evidence of his racial-ethnic identity—every group must have its own names, Rennick, “Nazi Name Decrees,” 69–70, citing Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961),120.

121 Bering, *The Stigma of Names*, n. 24. Though I have brought these examples pertaining to women’s names, men’s names were derided too: “Kaleb—that could perhaps be a bus company; Feibisch—a tea good for coughs.”


123 September 15, 1941, Rennick, “Nazi Name Decrees,” 73.


125 Ibid., 145–6.

126 The phrase is borrowed from a poem written by the Israeli poet Zelda. It was published as part of her poetry collection *Do Not Stay Away* (1974). The poem is frequently read at official ceremonies commemorating the Holocaust, including ceremonies which entail reading the names of Holocaust victims. The poem also lent its name to Yad Vashem’s “Every Person has a Name” memorial project. The poem is based on the *midrash* cited at the opening of this article.


129 The year 5708 was declared by the Hanhala HaTzionit and the Vaad HaLeumi as “the year of citizenship and the Hebrew name.” Later years saw the establishment of the *Vaadat Shemot Ivriim*, *Vaadat HaShem HaIvri*, as well as publications of the Academic Secretariat of the Academy of the...
Hebrew Language—see Yaakov Aricha, *Bchar Lach Shem Mishpacha Ivri* (Jerusalem: The Scientific Secretariat of the Academy of the Hebrew Language, 1954), n. 68, which explains the above history on pp. 3–8; see also Elishava Hacohen and Aviad Hacohen, “The Right to a Name” (Unpublished Statement of Opinion Prepared for the Civil Service Commission, January 20, 1997), 3 (with thanks to the authors for this source). In particular, David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister, and Izhak Ben-Zvi, the second president, were known for their enthusiastic encouragement of name changing, Aricha, *Bchar Lach*, 5–7; Rosen, *P’soh li Shimkha*, 246–50; Arazi, *V’Ele Shemot*, 137. Note, however, following World War II, Jews throughout the world were changing their names to suit their new countries of residence, e.g., Jews who ended their escape in America or France, see Maass, “Integration and Name-changing,” 165, n. 49 providing examples of other countries.

It is noteworthy that even though the focus was on forenames too, greater emphasis does appear to have been put on surnames, see, for example, Rosen, *P’soh li Shimkha*, 246; leaders tended to change their surnames, not forenames. Note that Golda Meir Hebraized her surname alone.

President Izhak Ben Tzvi, cited in Aricha, *Bchar Lach*, 5–6. Regarding the emphasis on the military, note, for instance, the establishment of the *Vaadat Shemot Ivriim*. Its function was to suggest Hebrew names to all soldiers and commanders serving in the Israel Defense Forces. Heading the commission was Lt.-Colonel Mordechai Nimtza-Bi (Nimtzavitsky), who also authored a special booklet on the matter. On all military posts was stamped: “Soldier—change your vernacular name to a Hebrew one!” (Aricha, *Bchar Lach*, 6 and Hacohen, “The Right to a Name, 3). In the 1975 *Takanot BiDvar Shemot*, the Interior Minister exempted soldiers from paying the toll for a change of name (*Kovetz Takanot*, 3284 from Rosen, *P’soh li Shimkha*, 175–6). In 1981, the head of *Akka*, Maj.-General Moshe Nativ, directed that any soldier of the rank of lieutenant colonel and above, serving in the Permanent Force, would not be advanced in rank unless he had a Hebrew surname (ibid., 249, citing *Sofshavua*, January 16, 1981). Regarding the Civil Service in general, especially the Foreign Service, a directive from the Prime Minister’s Office from May 13, 1950 recounted the decision of the Minister of Foreign Affairs that diplomatic passports would not be granted to anyone bearing a non-Hebrew name, whether first or family name; an announcement (#16-9) of the Civil Service Commission (October 15, 1955) called on all civil servants to adapt their names to Hebrew, especially those representing the nation overseas; an additional directive from the Foreign Ministry (March 23, 1969) sent to the various government offices, stated that no service passport would be granted to those not bearing Hebrew or Hebrew-style names—exemptions required special permission. On July 5, 1987, the policy was tempered by the decision of the acting prime minister and minister of foreign affairs to allow the addition of a Hebrew name to an existing one (see Hacohen, “The Right to a Name,” 3–4). In some cases, so it seems, “transgression” entailed the threat of a cancelled passport, DK, July 25, 1956, 2240–41.

In the Soviet Union, ibid., 2241.
Under these circumstances, it is somewhat ironic to note that the only woman to be elected prime minister of Israel, Golda Meir, was one of the few who opposed the policy and obeyed it only under duress, Arai, *V’Ele Shmot*, 28. Another dissenter was Berl Katzenelson. Opposition to this pressure was also voiced in the Knesset discussion on the Law of Names (*S.H.* 1956, no.94; for the Bill and Explanatory Notes, see *H.H.* 268 (1956), MK Yunitzman, DK, June 25, 1956.

This statement does not intend to imply that the author sides with the enactment of such a law.

Names Law, 5716–1956, passed by the Knesset on 17 Av 5716 (July 25, 1956) and published in S.S. 207 of 26 Av 5716 (August 3, 1956), p. 94; the Bill and an Explanatory Note were published in *H.H.* 268 (June 11, 1956), p. 132.

MK Yaakov Nitzani (Mapai) (June 25, 1956), 2094; MK Yisrael-Shlomo Rozenberg (Hapoel Hamizrachi V’Hamizrachi), DK, June 25, 1956, 2098.

For some general discussion of the Hebraization of names and the question of the degree to which the law ought to proceed in encouraging/coercing such changes, see, generally, DK July 25, 1956, 2436–43, especially MKs Riftin, Refael, Rokach, and Yunitzman—notably all men. At most, it was decided to “facilitate”—rather than “force”—the adoption of Hebrew names. See, for example, MK Yisrael Rokach, June 25, 1956, 2092–93 and MK Yaakov Riftin (Head of the Knesset Committee of the Interior), July 25, 1956, 2442 (the aim was to educate rather than force). One of the most outspoken MKs against forcing the Hebraizing of names was Shimshon Yunitzman of the right-wing *Cherut* party, who openly criticized the (earlier-mentioned) pressure that had been recently brought to bear upon the members of certain government ministries, soccer players, among others, to Hebraize their names. “In a publication of the Ministry of Justice,” he declared, “it is written that a person’s name constitutes his own private property, and this right ought to be protected”: MK Yunitzman, June 25, 1956, 2090–91 and 2440–41. Yunitzman declared himself to be a prime example of a justified case for the failure to change one’s *galut* name—he was no longer able, he declared, to consult first with his father and mother.

See also sec. 22 of the Law. Yisrael Bar-Yehuda was formerly Yisrael Idelson and married to the well-known Israeli feminist Beba Idelson. It is interesting to note that she continued to go by the name Idelson, without Hebraizing it, even after she was divorced and remarried.

Sec. 4. It also laid out a plan of action in cases of disagreement between parents on the bestowing of a child’s first name. (“In the absence of agreement between the parents, each of them may give the child a first name; however, a child born when his mother is not married to his father and is not known to the public as his wife, is given a first name by his mother alone.”).

Sec. 16 of the Names Law (1956). According to MK Yaakov Riftin, who represented the Knesset committee that drew up the Names Law, the aim was to disallow names that were intended, for example, to offend others in terms of their religious or nationalistic beliefs, DK. July 25, 1956, 2437.

Interior Minister Y. Bar-Yehuda, July 25, 1956, 2100–02.
See Avraham Stahl, “The Imposition of Hebrew Names on New Immigrants to Israel: Past and Present,” *Names* 42 (1994): 279, 281, who also brings the example of a domestic servant’s name being changed by her mistress, ibid., 280. This phenomenon served as the background to the legislation of the Names Law in 1956, even though, in the end, the Law did not deal with the Hebraization of personal names (in this regard see the remarks of the Minister of Interior, DK, June 26, 1956, 2100). (Cf. Maass, “Integration and Name-changing,” 129–39, discussing name changes of Jews from Germany and Austria who came to America from 1933 onward because of the Nazis. Often such changes were made on the forceful suggestion of immigrant officials unable to cope with complicated foreign patronymics. Regarding the more recent Russian and Ethiopian immigration, see Stahl, “Imposition of Hebrew Names,” and Teshome G. Wagaw, “The Emigration and Settlement of Ethiopian Jews in Israel,” *Middle East Review* 20, no. 2 (1987-88): 41, 47. Regarding the recent Ethiopian immigrants, one must add to the list of name-changers rabbis, after immersion, when it was considered necessary, ibid., 283.


See, for example, Henry Abramovitch and Yoram Bilu, “Visitational Dreams and Naming Practices among Moroccan Jews in Israel,” *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 27 (1985): 13, 20. On intermale naming in the past, see, for example, Avigdor Aptowizer and Eliezer Ben Yoel Halevi, *Sefer Mavo Ra’avia* (Berlin-Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1912-1937), 36–38; Lauterbach, “Naming of Children,” 18; Baruch A. Levine, “Levites,” in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 8 (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 523, 525; for Jewish sources, see *Ba’alei HaTosafot, Radak, Maharam Elyaschech*, and *Ramban* on Gen 38: 5; cf. an anecdote told by MK Ruth Hektin during the Knesset discussion of the names law in which she and others tried to impress upon a seven-year-old orphan girl the necessity to Hebraize her name for her own good, but the child refused to relinquish the name given to her by her mother and father, DK June 25, 1956); MK Ruth Hektin (*Achdut haavoda-Poalei Tzion*), 2090. See also Yisrael Shlomo Rozenberg (*Hapoel Hamizrahi V’Hamizrahi*), DK June 25, 1956, 2099, relating how his daughter was named after her two grandmothers and when they immigrated to Israel, he changed both names to Hebrew. Cf. Munitz, “Jewish Customs,” 136–9, arguing that in a situation of so little information about mothers and their relatives, such findings can never be certain.

See also Beit-Hallahmi, “Naming Norms,” 203, on how Jewish-Israeli girls’ names change at a much faster rate than those of boys (adding that this phenomenon of greater “flexibility” in girls’ names may be found in many cultures). Regarding the Jews of Yemen, see Gaimani, “Names of Jewish Women,” 56–57 (discussing various customs that involved the changing of women’s names, for instance, on marriage and when pregnant, in an attempt to influence the sex of the fetus). For a modern, literary version, see Nessa Rapoport, “The Woman Who Lost Her Names,” in *The Woman Who Lost*...
Her Names, ed. Julia Wolf Mazow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980). Also, in modern times women’s family names change, by law, as they are passed through life from man to man, see Leissner, “Naming the Unheard of,” 349–66 (also noting that during Victorian times, this logic was applied to women’s first names too (i.e., Mrs John Doe, 343–4). See also Leah Bornstein-Makovetsky, “The Jews of Izmir in the 18th and 19th centuries according to Communal Records of Divorce,” in These Are The Names: Studies in Jewish Onomastics, vol. 3, ed. Aaron Demsky (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002). Women’s names were frequently changed—including for health reasons where men’s names would rather be joined by an additional name, e.g., “Chaim,” “Raphael,” etc., Munitz, “Jewish Customs,” 21, n. 83 citing Migdal Oz II:18: (“benekavot rgilim lehotzi shmoteihen bshinuim rabim...”).

Rosen, P’soh li Shimkha, 167–8, also quoting a psychiatric paper on the matter; Wagaw, “Ethiopian Jews,” 47 (adding that the name-change also avoids discrimination on the basis of names). See also Bering, The Stigma of Names, 195 (research regarding students in Denmark; name-change assisted in integration).

Stahl, “Imposition of Hebrew Names,” 282. “Years later these acts came to symbolise the failure to absorb the Eastern Jews”; Rosen, P’soh li Shimkha, 248–50; Maass, “Integration and Name-changing” 163–5. An interesting example is that of Memmi, in Liberation of the Jew, 31–42, where he discusses how Jews tend to choose a new name which has some connection with the old. He analyses the phenomenon as stemming from the difficulty of losing or mutilating one’s own name, which is part of the self and the connection to one’s family and past. To illustrate this difficulty, it is remarkable that he uses the example of the plight of the marrying woman’s loss of name, however, the pain of (Jewish) women themselves is ignored. Cf. Harvey Goldberg, “Names in Their Social Contexts—An Anthropological Perspective,” in Demsky et al., These Are the Names vol. 1, 53, arguing that the process was not monolithic, and that immigrants could and did relate to the name changing in different ways.

Stahl, “Imposition of Hebrew Names,” 282, explaining how, in connection with the mass immigration from the Eastern bloc and Ethiopia in the 1990s, attempts were finally made not to repeat the mistakes of the 1950s. This included an informal decision to be more tolerant towards non-Hebrew names, as well as the publication of a booklet by Reuben Mamo to assist teachers in choosing names for Ethiopian immigrants. Nonetheless, the discrimination in this regard between the Russian and Ethiopian new immigrants is noteworthy, ibid., 285.


But some argue that the general attitude to the Hebraization of names was changing by then, see note 148 above.

Binyamin Beit-Hallahmi asserts that: “Members of all streams of Judaism took part in this nominal revolution, save for the Ultra Orthodox (the Haredim), who, until today, remain steadfast in their use of traditional Jewish names.” interview with Prof. Binyamin Beit-Hallahmi (head of the Psychology department at the University of Haifa) on his recent research on names, Makor Rishon, 9–11 (undated, source on file with the author) (hereinafter: interview). His conclusions are based on examination of the national population registers of the Interior Ministry since 1900.

Beit-Hallahmi views the history of Jewish names, as reflected in parents’ choice of their children’s names since the advent of Zionism, as one of a “rejection of the (Jewish) past.” First there was a rejection of the Jewish “galuti” (Diaspora) languages, e.g., Yiddish (see also Rosen, P’soh li Shimkha, 230–2). Thereafter, there was a rejection (albeit not a total one) of traditionally Jewish names. And finally, in recent years, he notes the “internationalizing” of Israeli names. According to Beit Hallahmi, this latest rejection of Jewishness in names has occurred despite the fact that the parents giving the names have a relatively strong Jewish identity, hence, his identification of a severance between national (Jewish) identity and its expression in names. Beit-Hallahmi, interview, 9–10. See also Beit-Hallahmi, “Naming Norms,” 191, 195. See also Memmi (Liberation of the Jew), who views the name-changing as self-rejection. Memmi also discusses the phenomenon of Israelis changing their names, and how, while the intention is the opposite, the mechanism of transformation is identical, i.e., name-change but not completely, e.g., Moshe Shertook=Sharet, Green=Ben-Gurion. “Thus even in his new-found glory, the oppressed does not immediately cease being one of the oppressed.” Arazi, V’Ele Shemot, 145, also observed a certain break-away from the custom of naming children after their deceased grandparents, and so on. Paula H. Hyman talks of “The Zionist rejection of Diasporah names may be viewed as part of the general rejection of the image of the galuti male Jew, who was often depicted by antisemites as a woman with her supposed faulty, false and manipulative use of language,” Gender and Assimilation, 139.

Beginning in the period of Hibat Zion, the end of the nineteenth century, there was a revival of Tanakhic names, e.g., Beit-Hallahmi, “Naming Norms” (generally); V’Ele Shmot, 145. According to researchers, to this day Israelis demonstrate a preference for names of the ancient biblical era rather than the names of the intervening years, Rachel Dinur, Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, and John E. Hofman, “First Names as Identity Stereotypes,” The Journal of Social Psychology 136, no. 2 (1996): 191, 192.

In the booklet, Yaakov Aricha, Nivchar Shem (Jerusalem: The Scientific Secretariat of the Academy of the Hebrew Language, 1959), almost every name complies with grammatical criteria.


Regarding the matter of gender distinction in names, at least one scholar has declared his opinion of it as, “first and foremost, one that female Members of Knesset should consider. All things aside, what is important in this matter is the aspect of aesthetics—which is closest to the hearts of women,” Rosen, *P’soh li Shimkha*, 168–9.

Lesley Hazleton, *Israeli Women: The Reality behind the Myths* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 95–96, discussing the gendered nature of the Hebrew language. On the existence of these stereotypes in other generations and places, see, for example, Bornstein-Makovetsky, “Jews of Izmir”: women’s names generally connote flowers, beauty, etc. Rarely did they connote religious values. In modern Hebrew, “flower names,” even in the masculine form, would be avoided for boys. The fact that flower names do not appear to be as common today as they were in the past cannot be seen to signify a reduced importance of fashion, but rather a change in fashion. See the discussion in Alice S. Rossi, “Naming Children in Middle Class Families,” *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965): 499, 504, n. 11, regarding girls’ less traditional, more currently fashionable names: “New names are constantly added to the cultural repertory of first names. One analysis of girls’ names points out the contrast in the cultural source of new names during the past century, from ‘flower’ names... and ‘jewel’ names, to currently popular names... drawn from stars of the entertainment world,” citing Linwood Sleigh and Charles Johnson, *The Book of Girls’ Names* (London: Harrap, 1962).

See also Tehila Berender, “To Every Man a Name,” 1 *Daat Lashon: Research in the Hebrew Language* (Mechkarim Belashon Haivrit Letkafoteah) (2008): 179, remarking that when it comes to new/invented names, secular parents are more likely than other groups to give girls a name, usually a noun, in the male grammatical form. Uni-sex names are most common among secular Israelis, ibid., 181.

Beit-Hallahmi, interview, 11; Rosen, *P’soh li Shimkha*, 155–8. Beit-Hallahmi reports that (since 1970) the appearance of bilingual first names (Hebrew/English) or the “internationalizing” of Israeli names among secular Israelis, “who do not want any part of being Jewish,” e.g., Tom, Guy, Dean, or Shirley, Karen, Sharon, and Maya (Beit-Hallahmi, interview, 10; and in Beit-Hallahmi, “Naming Norms,” 200–05). While Beit-Hallahmi does not note any explicit gender discrepancy in this trend, the lists of girls’ names persistently contain fewer (or none, regarding 1991) traditional names.

See, for example, Beit-Hallahmi, interview, 11 (remarking on the recent phenomenon of giving boys’ names, such as, Tal, Daniel, and Zohar, to girls). On the general finding that popularity of unisex names is usually brief and that ultimately names tend to evolve from masculine to unisex to feminine, see Herbert Barry, III and Aylene S. Harper, “Feminization of Unisex Names,” *Names* 41, no. 4 (1993): 228–38, and “Evolution of Unisex Names,” *American Name Society* 30, no. 1 (1982): 15–22. See also Berender, “To Every Man a Name,” 176, and the following remark of one of my anonymous reviewers: “unisex names are very popular today and many girls are given ‘masculine’ names, e.g., Shai, Lior, Tal, Gal, Daniel, etc., not vice versa. No female’s name is given to males.
However, traditional male’s names are not given to women; no girl is named Yaakov, Yehuda, David, Yosef, etc.”

Ozick, “Notes,” “On the Diminution of Prestige: Item,” 128 (discussing how in liberal congregations, now that the honor of carrying the scrolls of Torah for the festival of Simhat Torah or of becoming congregational presidents has been opened to women, fewer and fewer men come forward to receive these honors); also note: Kaganoff, *Dictionary of Jewish Names*, 61, mentions the phenomenon of non-Jewish names being adopted by Jews, and then being rejected by non-Jews. Cf. the discussion of Rossi, “Naming Children in Middle Class Families,” 499, 504, n.11 regarding girls’ less traditional, more currently fashionable names discussing research suggesting that in rural England names trickle down the class system.

Arazi, *V’Ele Shemot*, 165–7. Also, an examination of the lists of most popular names among Jewish Israelis over the last few decades reveals that the turnover of names for girls continues to be far greater than that of boys (Telem Yahav, “From Then until Today: What Are the Most Popular Names? A Comparison of Personal Names from the 1950s until 2013,” YNET, May 19, 2013; Yarden Drukman, “For the First Time: The Country’s Names, Year by Year,” YNET, January 24, 2014; “Why Did Michal Laugh – The Names of the Country (Girls),” YNET, January 31, 2014). See also Edwin D. Lawson, “Most Common Jewish First Names in Israel,” *Names* 39 (1991): 103, based on samples of 10,000, it was found that for both men and women, 90% of the names came from Hebrew, but for males 70% came from the Bible, whereas for women the figure stood at 40%. See also Beit-Hallahmi, “Naming Norms,” 191, as well as Beit-Hallahmi, interview, 9–11. But see Sasha Whitman, “Personal Names as Cultural Markers: Trends in the National Identity of Israelis, 1882-1980,” in *Emdat Tatspit: Tarbut V’Hevra B’Eretz Yisrael*, ed. Nurit Ganz (Tel Aviv: 1988), 141, on the general tendency of Israelis to reject the names of the previous generation.

Beit-Hallahmi, interview, 11.

Berender, “To Every Man a Name”; Whitman, “Personal Names”; Stahl, “Family Names.” Stahl compared children’s names in the national-religious and secular population groups. He found that traditional names were more common in the religious than in the secular groups, and more among boys than girls. In addition, he found more new names within the secular population. He found vernacular names used for secular girls alone, see, for example, Berender, “To Every Man a Name,” 178. See also Whitman, in “Personal Names,” remarking on the “inward” turn taken by Israeli society as reflected in their names, until the late 1960s, and thereafter, he notes an “outward” turn in names, with some groups turning to their Jewish roots and others to cosmopolitanism.

Berender, “To Every Man a Name,” 174, 177. See also Stahl, “Family Names indicating fewer traditional names for girls in all population groups.

Demsky is cited in a short article entitled “What’s in a Jewish Name?” which was posted on the Bar-Ilan University website following the publication of Demsky et al.’s *These Are the Names: Studies in Jewish Onomastics*, vol. 1. The article was originally posted here:
http://www.biu.ac.il/Spokesman/scholar/names.html, and, subsequently:
http://www.factsofisrael.com/blog/archives/000361.html. See also Demsky, “Jewish Women’s Names.”

171  Bill of Zevulun Orlev and Miri Regev, P/18/3129, Names Law Amendment Bill (Names that are liable to cause damage to a minor), 2011-5771 (18th Knesset). It is noteworthy that the invention of outlandish new names for babies is on some level an international trend, particularly among celebrities.

172  If the child is under the age of ten, the parents may change his/her first name, provided that if s/he is able to express his/her opinion, s/he will be granted an opportunity to express his/her position, will, and feelings on the matter. If the child is over ten years, s/he must formally agree. A minor may change his/her first name with the consent of his/her parents; if the parents did not give their consent to the change, s/he may file an action, and the provisions of section 3 (d) of the Family Court Law, 5755-1995, shall apply in this matter.

173  The Names Law Amendment was passed in the Knesset on July 30, 2014. The Bill and Explanatory Notes were published on July 14, 2014, SH 127. See Names Law Bill (Amendment number 6), 5774-2014, P/1983. Another change was made to the law: until this point in time, in cases where the parents did not agree on the name of the child and the parents were unmarried, the mother would name the child. Following the amendment of the Law, in cases of disagreement between the parents the child will be given two names—one by each parent.


175  See also Berender’s remark that in the past it was not accepted to give children the names of “villains,” but in our time children are given such names as Atalia, Nimrod, Aviram, and Omri; “To Every Man a Name,” 170.


180  Thus it is that vernacular names are still given in Israel, both within the Haredi and the secular communities, Berender, “To Every Man a Name,” 278. See also Berender’s remarks regarding conservatism in name-giving in the Haredi community, 176–77. Most Yiddish names are disappearing, Cohn, Yiddish Given Names, 3. But see Whitman, “Personal Names,” 149, on “the complete lack of
any [nominal] identification on the part of Israelis with their Arab neighbours.” Cf. more generally, it is noteworthy that “there is a tendency to add a second Jewish name in memory of an ancestor,” Demsky, “Jewish Women’s Names.” See also Cohn, Yiddish Given Names, 39.

For citations, see nn. 178 and 179 above.


In spring 2008, JOFA (Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance) devoted a volume of its journal to the topic of women’s names (vol. 7, 1). See, especially, articles by Debby Koren, “If They Are Not Prophets, Then They Are the Children of Prophets,” 10; Carol Kaufman Newman, “Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother,” 1; and Seth (Shaul) Farber, “Claiming and Reclaiming Our Mothers’ Names,” 17.

During the course of writing this article, I did wonder at some point whether male names reflect a society “on the longitude” and women’s names “on the latitude.”


See Goitein, Mediterranean Society, 314–319, a general discussion of naming is found on pp. 6–15.

Ibid., 316.

Ibid., 314–7.

Ibid., 318. By contrast, names such as Chastity and Fertility, “regarded by men as the most praiseworthy attributes of a woman, are all but absent from the female onomasticon of the Geniza” (although Goitein maintains that the reason was that for women these qualities were taken for granted), 317.

Ibid., 318.

Ibid., 317, Goitein himself notes that “the proud names [that Jewish women tended to bear] were not particular to Jewish women.” But cf. Goldberg, “Names in Their Social Contexts,” 62–63, who disagrees with Goitein’s interpretation, indicating that the translation of the names adds little to the understanding of the dynamics of “Geniza society.” More generally see Gelis, History of Childbirth, 206: “The choice is up to the parents, and they would resent any attempt to deprive them of a freedom of choice which they look upon as their right. People today look for an unusual name for their child, or one which they think sounds distinguished; but in fact, the attempt only leads them back into utter conformity, since they do nothing but echo the fashion of the moment.” See also Demsky, “Jewish Women’s Names”: “…families are seeking more innovative and creative names to express their child’s individuality (Nofar, Ila, Nov, Tai and Si), only to find in five years that there are another ten children in the kindergarten with the same name.”