

Choosing a Name for a Child

Rabbi Aryeh Lebowitz

I. Introduction. The importance of giving a child an appropriate name is well documented in rabbinic literature. The Talmud, based on a verse in *Mishlei*, states that one's name can determine his lot in life.¹ The Maharsha explains that God's actions are sometimes influenced by a person's name. The Gemara comments that Rut merited Dovid as a descendant as a result of her name. The name of Rut is alluded to in the phrase *shirov v'tishbachot*, a reference to the songs and praises that were written by Dovid. In a similar vein, the *Midrash* warns us to be careful in choosing a name for a child, as his name may predispose him to certain tendencies. The *Midrash* proceeds to show how each of the spies who slandered the land of Israel had a name that would indicate a predisposition to this sin². In a positive light, the Talmud teaches that Chushim had many children as a result of his name.³

In light of the importance of the decision, parents can be overwhelmed by the task of choosing a name for their child. To compound the problem, very

¹ *Berachot* 7b.

² *Midrash Tanchuma, Parshat Ha'azinu* 7. Although the *Midrash* and Talmud speak of tendencies that originate with a person's name, they hardly suggest that one is incapable of overcoming such tendencies. In fact, *Midrash Rabbah Berishit* 71:3 states that some people had names that would suggest a predisposition toward service of God, and had overcome that predisposition and failed miserably in their service of God. Others had names that would suggest rebellion against God, but became faithful servants of God.

³ *Bava Batra* 143b and Tosafot s.v. *she'hayu*.

often the choice of a name can be a source of tension between husband and wife, and even between families. In this essay we will outline some of the guidelines, based on traditional sources, for naming a baby. It should be noted at the outset, however, that few if any of the sources cited suggest a *halachic* imperative governing the choice of a name. Indeed, the Talmud and the *Shulchan Aruch* provide few if any rules on how to choose an appropriate name for a child. Most of what we will discuss is based on *minhag*, as observed and recorded by the *gedolei haposkim* throughout the generations. Their differing positions often reflect viewpoints that attempt to balance and prioritize alternative ethical considerations or traditions.

It should be clear that circumstances both historical and personal, led to diverse practices that reflect the application of rabbinic sensitivities to situations that arose. Even the practice of giving a child the precise name of an ancestor, became widespread only in the period of the *Tannaim*. Most often those historical and personal circumstances are not recorded and are in any case beyond the scope of this essay.

We will begin with a discussion of who should be naming the child. We will then move on to the issue of for whom it is most appropriate to name the child, followed by a discussion of names to be avoided. Finally, we will discuss the custom to give multiple names to a single child, and the varying viewpoints of the *poskim* on this practice. Obviously, there are many more issues that may arise when choosing a name for a child (naming for an

individual of another gender,⁴ naming adopted children,⁵ the Sephardic custom to name after the living and the origin of the Ashkenazic custom not to name after the living,⁶ etc.). This article attempts to address only the most general and common issues, and to provide sources for each viable custom.

II. Does the mother's family or the father's family have the rights to the first

name? It is very clear from all of the *poskim* that both the father and the mother have the right to decide the name of the child. In fact, the *Midrash* refers to a person's name as the one that his "father and mother give to him".⁷ Whose side of the family should name the first child, is entirely dependant on custom.

A. The Sephardic custom has always been to name the first child from the father's side of the family. The *poskim* suggest two biblical sources for this custom:

- 1.** Rav Ovadia Yosef⁸ points to the naming of Yehudah's children in *Sefer Bereishit*⁹ as the source of this custom. The *Chumash*

⁴ For a treatment of this issue, see *Nachalat Shiva* page 122 and *Sefer Hametzaref* #86.

⁵ For a ruling on this issue, see Responsa *Iggerot Moshe Yoreh Deah* I #161.

⁶ For a thorough treatment of the custom to name after people who are deceased, and whether we may bypass this custom, see Rabbi Nachum Lamm's article in *Beit Yitzchak* 5747.

⁷ *Kohelet Rabah* 7:3. In this light, it should be pointed out that the child's name is solely the decision of the parents and they should not be pressured by anybody (grandparents etc.) into using names with which they are uncomfortable.

⁸ Responsa *Yabia Omer* V:Yoreh Deah:21:1

records that Yehudah named his first son (Er), and his wife named the second son (Onan). Although, the Torah mentions that his wife named the third son as well, *Da'at Zekeinim Mi'balei Hatosafot* points out that the Torah specifically tells us that Yehudah was out of town at the time of the naming of his third child and was therefore unable to name him.¹⁰ If both parents are present, however, it seems that they should alternate naming the children, with the father naming the first child. Although the Ramban rejects this interpretation of the *pesukim*,¹¹ later in this essay we will demonstrate that he normally supported the custom to have the first child named from the father's side.

2. The *Ben Ish Chai* points out that the two sons of *Aharon Hakohen* who died young were both named for family members. The elder son, *Nadav*, was named for his maternal grandfather

⁹ *Bereishit* Chapter 38, verses 3-5

¹⁰ Commentary to *Bereishit* *ibid*.

¹¹ Commentary to *Bereishit* *ibid*. For a novel approach to this issue, specifically how it relates to these *pesukim*, see Rav Yakov Kaminetzky's *Emet L'Yakov al hatorah* pages 171, 197, 198, and 201 where he suggests that the mother is naturally more capable of choosing an appropriate name for her child as she is able to recognize the child's disposition. However, the custom was for the father to name the first child because traditionally the oldest son took the father's place as leader of the family. It is only appropriate that the father should determine the nature of the one who will carry on his legacy. This is also why Yakov *Avinu* named Levi because he was the one to carry on the legacy of torah set by Yakov (see *Rambam Hilchot Avoda Zara* 1:3).

Aminadav. The name of the younger son, *Avihu*, is a reference to his paternal grandfather. The name is a combination of the words “*Avi*” and “*Hu*” (he is my father). The *Ben Ish Chai*’s startling suggestion is that both of these sons died during the lifetimes of their parents as a tragic consequence of their names being given in reverse order.¹²

¹² *Ben Ish Chai Parshat Shoftim* II:27. See also Responsa *Yabia Omer* V:*Yoreh Deah*:21 who writes that if the paternal grandfather is willing to forgo the honor, they may name for the maternal grandfather. This ruling is based on the *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah* 240:19 that gives a parent the right to forgo the honor that they deserve. Although a parent may not forgive being embarrassed, naming after the other side of the family first can hardly be deemed an embarrassment (*bizayon*). This ruling, however, is difficult for another reason. The *Sefer Chasidim* 573 (cited countless times by the *Chida* (*Birkei Yosef Yoreh Deah* 240:12-13, *Yosef Ometz* 87, *Shiyurei Berachah* 9, amongst other places) points out that while one is not held accountable in human courts for failure to respect parents when they are *mochel*, one is still going to be punished in the heavenly court. If this is the case, some have questioned why one may name for the maternal grandfather first, even when the paternal grandfather is willing to forgo the honor. *Sefer Mora Horim V’kibudam Hashalem* 3:56 addresses this question and writes that even the *Sefer Chasidim* would acknowledge that if the parent is *mochel* before any act showing a lack of respect is done, one is exempt even *b’dinei shamayim*. More fundamentally, however, the *Sefer Chasidim* would agree that we may rely on the *mechila* when it is *b’makom mitzvah*. This is clear from the ruling of the *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 472:5 that a son is obligated to lean at the *Pesach seder* even when in front of his father because the father is *mochel*. If we may not rely on *mechilah* even *b’makom mitzvah* the son should still not be permitted to lean. In our case, the need to maintain *shalom bayit* would certainly qualify as a *makom mitzvah*.

B. The current Ashkenazic custom is that the mother's side of the family has the rights to the first name.¹³ Rav Moshe Feinstein goes even further and rules that if the first child died at a very young age the woman maintains her right to name the next child.¹⁴ There is no clear source for this custom, but the *Yalkut* states that a *bat kol* came from heaven declaring that a *tzadik* will soon be born and his name will be Shmuel, and all of the *women* then named their children Shmuel,¹⁵ giving the slight indication that the women had the right to the name. Although there are no clear sources for the custom to allow the mother to choose the first name, various reasons have been suggested, each reflecting strong ethical sensitivities.

1. Responsa *Keter Ephraim* explains that the bond between a daughter and her parents is weakened by her marriage because she leaves their home and now has responsibilities to her husband. Indeed, this weakened bond manifests itself in the halacha that a married woman is no longer obligated in the *mitzvah* of *kibud av v'eim* as it may interfere with her

¹³ See *Kuntros V'yikarei shemo b'yisrael* (written by Yosef Hakohen Oppenheimer) page 17 footnote 20 where after citing many conflicting biblical sources, leaving no conclusive proof from Tanach regarding who names the first child, the author writes that the current custom is clearly to allow the mother the first rights to the name of the child.

¹⁴ Responsa *Iggerot Moshe Yoreh Deah* 3:101

¹⁵ *Midrash Yalkut, Shmuel*, 78

responsibilities toward her husband.¹⁶ In order to strengthen this newly weakened bond, the first child is named from the mother's side of the family.¹⁷

2. *Sefer Otzrot Yerushalayim* suggests another reason for this custom. He explains that in many communities the father of the bride would accept all of the young couple's financial responsibilities for the first two years of marriage. It is therefore most appropriate that in exchange for his support, the first child should be named for somebody in his family.

III. Should precedence in naming be given to a Rebbe or religious leader, or a family member?

Sometimes a student who feels close to his Rebbe will want to name a child for his Rebbe rather than for a family member. This practice is especially prevalent in Chassidic circles where a high percentage of children are named for the previous leader of a particular Chassidic dynasty. There is considerable debate among *poskim* concerning this practice. We will outline the sources that would support each viewpoint and an approach to perhaps reconcile them.

A. Sources to indicate that one should name for a Rebbe.

¹⁶ See *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah* 240:17. See also *Torah Temimah Vayikra* 19:3 who suggests that this exemption only applies to the obligation of *kibud* but not the obligation of *mora*.

¹⁷ Responsa *Keter Ephraim* #39

1. The Talmud tells the story of *Rabi Eliezer b'Rabi Shimon* who one day arrived at the *Beit Medrash* and had to rule on blood stains from sixty different women. After analysis of each stain, he determined that all of the women were *tahor* and therefore permitted to be with their husbands without having to immerse in a *mikvah* first. The women all went home, conceived and subsequently gave birth to male children, all of whom were named Eliezer after the Rabbi.¹⁸
2. The Talmud relates the story of a woman who had already lost two sons due to illness resulting from their *brit milah*. Upon the birth of her third son, she went to Natan Habavli to seek his advice. Natan examined the baby and noticed that his blood level was deficient and circumcision would probably endanger his life. He suggested that the woman wait until his blood level improved and only then circumcise the child. The woman heeded the rabbi's advice and the child survived his circumcision. The woman then named her child Natan after the rabbi who may have saved his life.¹⁹
3. The *Sefer Habrit*²⁰ cites the *Sefer Chemdah Genuzah* who relates the story of the birth of the *Ramban*'s grandson. Although the

¹⁸ *Bava Metzia* 84b

¹⁹ *Shabbat* 134a

²⁰ page 320

custom was to name the first child after the father's side, the *Ramban* told his son to name the child after the child's maternal grandfather *Rabeinu Yonah* because he was also the Rebbe of the child's father, and honor for one's Rebbe supersedes the honor due to one's parents.

B. Sources to indicate that priority should be given to names from the family.

1. The *Midrash* notes that in earlier generations when people were sufficiently familiar with the history of their ancestors, they would name their children based on the events surrounding their birth. In fact, most of the names that are found in *Tanach* were original names whose etymology is often explicitly traced to an event or an emotion of the parents at the time of the birth. Now that people are no longer as familiar with their family history, people name their children after their ancestors. Another opinion in the *Midrash* traces the change in naming custom to the loss of *ruach hakodesh*.²¹ One can only choose an appropriate name for a child based on *ruach hakodesh*. In the absence of *ruach hakodesh* one can only choose an appropriate name by naming

²¹ The *Midrash* is addressing the issue of what seems to be a long forgotten biblical custom. In biblical times we find that most names that were given were original names invented by the parents based on the events surrounding the birth, or based on the experiences of the child's ancestors. The *Midrash* attempts to examine the origins of the current custom to name after another person who already had that name.

after a family member. Notably absent from the *midrash* is the notion that one should name a child after a rebbe.²²

2. The *amora*, *Abaye* is sometimes referred to as *Nachmeini*. *Rashi* explains that *Abaye* was orphaned as a baby. *Rabbah Bar Nachmaini* raised *Abaye* in his home and taught him Torah. *Rabah* called the child *Nachmeini* after his father.²³
3. *Sdei Chemed* quotes the *sefer She'eilat Shalom* who proves that the custom to name for a family member is an ancient one from the fact that *Raban Gamliel* named his son *Shimon* after his father.²⁴ In fact this younger *Shimon* named his own son *Gamliel* after his father.

C. The practical opinions of the *poskim*.

1. *Sefer Ziv Hasheimot* cites the *Noam Elimelech* and the *Sefer Brit Olam* who rule that the name of a rebbe takes precedence over the name of a family member. He relates this to the general rule that honor of a rebbe takes precedence over honor of a parent because the rebbe brings the person to *olam haba* whereas the

²² *Midrash Rabbah Bereishit* 37:7

²³ *Rashi Gittin* 34b s.v. *v'helchita k'Nachmeini*. See also Gilyon Hashas *ibid.* in the name of the Aruch who suggests that *Abaye's* real name was *Nachmeini*, but *Rabbah* could not call him by this name as it was also the name of *Rabbah's* father. Instead, *Rabbah* invented the nickname *Abaye* (from the root *av* to mean father) for the child. See also *Chidushei Chatam Sofer Gittin* *ibid.* and *Rashi to Horayot* 14b.

²⁴ *Ma'arechet kaf, klal* 104, "u'b'ikar". My Rebbe, Rav Ahron Silver, has pointed out that this proof is somewhat puzzling as R' *Shimon* may have also been *Rabban Gamliel's* rebbi.

parent only brings the person to *olam hazeh*.²⁵ Indeed all of the above mentioned sources in section A seem to support this contention. While the *Midrash* cited in section B is not directly addressed, we may suggest that these *poskim* would not view the absence of any mention of the custom to name for a rebbe in the *Midrash* as conclusive proof that a rebbe should not be preferred over a family member, especially considering the number of sources that record the practice of naming for a rebbe.

2. The author of the *Machaneh Chaim* wrote a letter to the author of *Divrei Yirmiyahu* stating that he regrets promising his rebbe (the author of *Sha'arei Torah*) that he would name his son after him. He explains that there are important kabbalistic reasons to specifically name a child after a family member.²⁶ Indeed, the Chatam Sofer who had a legendary relationship with his rebbe, Rav Natan Adler,²⁷ did not name any of his sons for his rebbe,

²⁵ *Bava Metzia* 33a One possible application of this concept can be found in the *Ramo Yoreh Deah* 242:1 who suggests that when one's father is his principal teacher he should refer to him as "Rebbe" and not as "Father" because the honor due to one's teacher exceeds the honor due to one's father. The *Ramo* proves this assertion from the *gemara Avodah Zara* 52b where Rabbi Shimon refers to his father as "Rebbe". See, however, *Shach Yoreh Deah* ad loc. It is important to note that the *mishnah* there rules that if one's father is also a *chacham* his honor takes precedence. See *Hagahot Hagra* ad loc. regarding whether the father must be equal in stature to the rebbi for this to hold true.

²⁶ *Responsa Mishneh Halachot* VI #252;258

²⁷ As a young boy, the Chatam Sofer left his parents' house and lived with his Rebbe, Rav Natan Adler. See *Responsa Chatam Sofer Yoreh Deah* 214. In many of his writings he refers to Rav Adler in the most

even though Rav Adler had no children who could perpetuate his name. Although the *Machaneh Chaim* does not reveal his reasons for wanting to only name for family, it would seem that he would give precedence to all relatives (even aunts uncles etc.) over somebody who is not related. Rabbi Betzalel Stern explains that naming after the relative of a father or mother is a fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *kibud av v'eim*.²⁸

3. A third approach has been suggested on this matter.²⁹ Based on the aforementioned sources we may conclude that one should name a baby for the people most responsible for his birth and existence in this world. The name is not given for one who may well in the future impact the child's spiritual development in preference to one who has already contributed to the child's physical existence. It is therefore most common to name for an

glowing terms. See Responsa *Chatam Sofer Choshen Mishpat* #50 where he writes "My hand literally did not move from his hand until I learned all of his ways, his goings and his comings etc." See also *Derashot Chatam Sofer* pages 371 – 373.

²⁸ Responsa *B'tzel Hachochmah* III, 108:12. My brother, Rav Avi Lebowitz, pointed out that this ruling is difficult to understand in that it presumes a very broad definition of the *mitzvah* of *kibud*. We do find that one can fulfill *kibud* after the death of the parent (by reciting "*hareini kaparat mishkavo*") when it is a clear and direct show of respect to the parent. We do not find, however, that doing something a parent would have been happy about is a fulfillment of *kibud*. For instance, it is difficult to imagine that one who wears a sweater that his deceased mother had knitted for him fulfills the *mitzvah* of *kibud av v'eim* because his mother liked when he wore that particular sweater.

²⁹ Approbation to *Sefer Ziv Hasheimot*

ancestor from whom the child descends directly. This is the most accepted custom, as suggested by the *Midrash*. In all of the sources cited above that indicate that a name was given for a rebbe, the rabbi played a crucial role in the birth or survival of the child. Had Natan Habavli not told the woman to wait before performing the circumcision, the child would not have survived. Had Rabi Eliezer not permitted the sixty women to their husbands their sons would not have been conceived. When someone other than a family member is chiefly responsible for the birth or survival of the baby (i.e. fertility doctor, marriage counselor) they too should rightfully take precedence in the naming of a child. Conversely, it would seem according to this approach that there is a less compelling reason to name a child for a relative whose contribution is less direct (i.e. aunt, uncle).

IV. People Who Should Not be Named For.

- A. *Reshaim*. The Talmud explains the meaning of the verse “*v’sheim reshaim yirkav*” (literally “the name of the wicked will rot”) that people should not name their children for wicked people, and in this way the name will become “rusty” from disuse.³⁰ Rabeinu Chananel writes that one who is

³⁰ *Yoma* 38b. This *gemara* is also the source for naming a child after a *tzadik* as a fulfillment of *zecher tzadik levracha*.

named for a wicked person will not be successful in life.³¹ The Maharsha states explicitly that one is forbidden to name his child for a wicked person.³²

1. Exceptions to the rule. While the sources clearly indicate that one should not name a child after a wicked person, many exceptions to this rule can be found throughout rabbinic literature.³³ The following is a list of circumstances where at least some *poskim* would allow a child to be named for a *rasha*:
 - a. When a *tzadik* (and certainly a righteous biblical figure) also had that name. Tosafot note that there was a *Tanna* named *Shevna* even though we find in *Sefer Yeshaya*³⁴ that *Shevna* was a *rasha*. Tosafot therefore explain that there

³¹ In his commentary to the *gemara* *ibid*.

³² *Chidushei Aggadot to Ta'anit* 28a. Rav Chaim Paladgi (*Sefer Chaim B'yad* #70) takes this one step further. He writes that even when one has a child who is a certain *mamzer* (born from a married woman), and they announce at the *brit* that he is a *mamzer*, he should still not be named for a *rasha*. See also *Agudah, Shabbat* Chapter 1 #17. Rav Meshulam Roth (*Responsa Kol Mevaser* 1:31:1) uses this as a consideration in ascertaining somebody's Hebrew name for the purposes of a *get*.

³³ One interesting exception may be found in the *Responsa Yehudah Ya'aleh Orach Chaim* #199 (authored by Rav Yehudah *ben* Yisrael Assad, a nineteenth century Hungarian authority). He writes that King Shaul was called by this name even though one of the evil kings mentioned in *Parshat Vayishlach* was also named Shaul because the source for avoiding names of the wicked is a verse in *Mishlei*, which was written by Shlomo *Hamelech*. Prior to Shlomo *Hamelech* writing this verse, such as during the days of King Shaul, there would have been no objection to naming a child after a wicked person.

³⁴ Chapter 22.

was another *Shevna*³⁵ who was righteous. Tosafot conclude that one may give a child the name of a *rasha* if there was a *tzadik* who had the same name.³⁶ If this were not the case, one would not be able to name his child Avraham if there was ever a wicked person named Avraham.³⁷ Obviously, not every Avraham in history was righteous, and people still name their children Avraham. Rabbi Moshe Shternbuch was asked about naming a baby for a relative who was not religious where the family would be very upset if they do not name after this family member. He points out that one may name a baby after a grandfather who did not observe *Shabbat* if the name is a common biblical name, and the father should silently intend that he is really naming the child for the righteous biblical figure who shared the same name.³⁸

³⁵ Found in *Yeshayahu* chapter 37.

³⁶ Commentary to *Yoma* *ibid.* See also Tosafot to *Ketubot* 104b s.v. *shenei*, *Megillah* 10b s.v. *Rabbah*, and *Shabbat* 12b s.v. *Shavna*. See also Responsa of the Ramo #41 who arrives at a similar conclusion.

³⁷ Tosafot *Shabbat* *ibid.* *Magid Meisharim* (*parshat Shemot*) explains this leniency as a reflection of the fact that when a person receives a name, he also receives something of the character of the very first or original bearer of that name. Therefore, if one is named Avraham, he will be inclined toward kindness.

³⁸ Responsa *Teshuvot V'hanhagot* I 606. Although *Brit Avot* 8:39 suggests that it is inappropriate to combine the name of a wicked person with the name of a *tzaddik*, that is only because of the disrespect shown to the name of the *tzaddik*, but adding a random name to the name of the wicked would certainly be permissible. This ruling of Rabbi Shternbuch seems to be in contrast to the ruling of Responsa *Binyamin*

- b. When a name is added. Rabbi Moshe Shternbuch suggests that when naming after a *rasha* one should add a name for blessing (such as Baruch, Aryeh, Rafael, and other generally positive names). He points out that although the Chazon Ish was known to disapprove of the custom to give a child two names, in this case even the Chazon Ish would acknowledge that it is the best option available. As a word of caution, Rav Shternbuch adds that one should certainly not allow these issues to cause an argument in the family.³⁹ It would seem that a minor modification of the name would also suffice in this case.⁴⁰
- c. Somebody who was not a completely wicked person. *Piskei Hatosafot* writes that if somebody violates only a single *aveirah* they should not be considered a *rasha* and

Ze'ev #204 (a 16th century halachic authority) who writes in the strongest terms that people should not try to save their own embarrassment or their parents' embarrassment by keeping the same name. In fact, if one has a father who is irreligious, he should not be called to the torah by his and his father's name, but by the name of his grandfather. It would follow that naming after a *rasha* in order to pacify a family member who is a *rasha* would be most inappropriate.

³⁹ Responsa *Teshuvot V'hanhagot* ibid. It seems that in the view of Rav Shternbuch it is important that the parent intend to name for the righteous person who had that name. The implication of tosafot, specifically in reference to their comment about the name Avraham, is that intent is unimportant so long as the name once belonged to a righteous person as well.

⁴⁰ See Tosafot *Gittin* 11a s.v. *shabta'i*.

we may name after them. Only one who is entirely wicked like *Doeg* should not be named for.⁴¹

- d. When the *rasha* did *teshuvah*. Many commentators grapple with the issue of how one of the greatest of the *Tannaim* was named *Yishmael* if, after all, *Yishmael* was a legendary *rasha*. The Tosafot Yeshanim and Ritva explain that if the *rasha* does *teshuvah* before passing away, we may name after him, and *Yishmael* did *teshuvah* before dying.⁴²
- e. God given names. In dealing with the question of *Yishmael*, Tosafot Yeshanim writes that since God mandated that the first son of *Avraham* be called *Yishmael* one may name their child *Yishmael*⁴³. The Chida extends this dispensation to all biblical names.⁴⁴

B. People who died young. Rabbi Yehudah Hachasid suggests that one refrain from naming a child after a person who died young, for it is feared that it may have been the name that caused the untimely death of that

⁴¹ *Sotah* #20.

⁴² Commentaries to *Yoma* *ibid*. The *gemara Avoda Zara* 17a states that when one does *teshuvah* at the end of their life, they are remembered as righteous. The *gemara* proves this from *Rabi Eliezer ben Duradya* who had relations with every prostitute in the world and only repented in the last moment of his life, yet he is called by the title *Rabi*.

⁴³ In a similar vein, the *Midrash Rabbah Bereishit* 71:3 states that the name *Yishmael* would suggest a predisposition to listening to God. *Yishmael* was wicked in spite of his name, not because of his name.

⁴⁴ *Sefer Yosaf Ometz*.

person.⁴⁵ The Maharshal writes that people do not name their children *Yeshayahu*, after the prophet because he was killed at a young age. Instead, people call their children *Yeshaya* (without the concluding *vav*). This minor change serves to mitigate any problem of naming for somebody who met an unfortunate end.⁴⁶ (Interestingly, the *Beit Shmuel* explains that people named *Yeshaya* are actually named after a different *Yeshaya* whose name appears in *Divrei Hayamim*, and who was not killed.⁴⁷) Similarly, the Chatam Sofer explains that people who name their children *Akiva* tend to spell it with a *heh* at the end instead of the *alef* that appears in the name *Rabi Akiva* in the *mishnayot* because *Rabi Akiva* also met an unfortunate end,⁴⁸ and the change of name serves to neutralize any negative effect the name may have.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *Sefer Chasidim* 363 – 364.

⁴⁶ *Yam Shel Shlomo Gittin* 4:31.

⁴⁷ *Hilchot Gittin, Sheimot Anashim, yud*.

⁴⁸ See *Berachot* 61b and *Avoda Zara* 18a that the Romans prohibited the study and teaching of torah. Rabbi Akiva ignored the decree, and was caught teaching torah in massive public gatherings. The *gemara* proceeds to outline the barbaric manner in which he was publicly executed, and his heroic last words. See also *Yerushalmi Berachot* 9:5. Although Rabi Akiva's death occurred in a most noble and righteous fashion, and serves as the model of dedication to torah for all future generations, the method with which he died is most tragic.

⁴⁹ Responsa *Chatam Sofer IV: Even Haezer* #28. Interestingly, the *Sefer Ohr Zarua* received its title based on the author's dream that he was shown the verse "*ohr zarua latzadik u'liyishrei lev simchah*" in response to his query about the proper spelling of the name Akiva (the last letter of each word in the verse spells out the name Akiva with a *heh*).

What emerges from all of these sources is that one should be careful to avoid calling a child by the name of somebody who met an untimely death. However, the Ramo writes that usually the name *Gedalyahu* is spelled with the concluding *vav* because it is usually after *Gedalyahu ben Achikam*.⁵⁰ It seems that the Ramo believes that we need not worry about naming for people who had an untimely passing, as we know that *Gedalyahu ben Achikam* was murdered,⁵¹ and people are named after him. Perhaps the point of contention between the Ramo and the Maharshal/Chatam Sofer is whether one should avoid naming for somebody whose death, while untimely, was *al kiddush Hashem*. In the view of the Ramo one need not refrain from naming after one who died a noble death regardless of the tragic circumstances surrounding the death. A contemporary practical application of this dispute would be whether one should avoid naming for people who were murdered in the Nazi Holocaust. However, we may suggest that even the Maharshal and Chatam Sofer, who discourage naming after those who died young even if it was *al kiddush Hashem*, would agree that one should name after somebody who perished during a national catastrophe involving indiscriminate murder of Jews (*al Kiddush Hashem*).

⁵⁰ *Even Haezer* 129:26.

⁵¹ See *Rosh Hashana* 18b.

1. How young is considered too young to name for? There are two basic approaches taken by the *poskim* in dealing with the exact age that is considered to be too young to name after.

a. Some *poskim* give an exact number as the cutoff point.

Responsa *Minchat Elazar* places this cutoff point at the age of fifty.⁵² If one wants to name for somebody who died before the age of fifty, a name should be added to the person's name. Rav Yakov Kaminetzky ruled that one who died before the age of sixty is considered to have died an early death and should not be named for directly.⁵³

b. Rav Moshe Feinstein, on the other hand, does not give an exact number as a cutoff point. Instead, he argues, we must evaluate, qualitatively, whether the person had a particularly difficult or incomplete life. Rav Feinstein argues that it is very difficult to quantify what is considered a “shortened life” considering that we do not know how many years a person was originally supposed to live. Among the indicators of a life that met an unfortunate end are those who die unnatural deaths and those who die

⁵² Volume IV #27.

⁵³ Cited by *Kuntros Ziv Hasheimot* 15:1. My brother, Rav Avi Lebowitz, suggests that this dispute may depend on the whether death at the hands of heaven or *karet* is the barometer for an unfortunate end. Tosafot *Yevamot* 2a writes that death at the hands of heaven is before the age of fifty whereas *karet* is before the age of sixty.

without children. After all, Shmuel Hanavi and Shlomo Hamelech died at the age of fifty-two,⁵⁴ and Chizkiyahu died at the age of fifty-four,⁵⁵ yet people have traditionally named their children Shmuel, Shlomo, and Chizkiyahu.⁵⁶

V. Choosing Multiple Names for a Child. The issue of somebody who has two (or more) names is one that has major halachic ramifications in the area of *gittin*.⁵⁷ A thorough discussion of this topic is well beyond the scope of this article. We will focus specifically on trying to ascertain when the practice of giving a child two names became prevalent,⁵⁸ and the propriety of this practice.

A. When did the practice of giving two names begin? There are various sources in rabbinic literature that seem to mention people who had two names from early in Jewish history. The *poskim* do not accept all of these

⁵⁴ *Midrash Hagadol Bereishit* 3:26.

⁵⁵ *II Melachim* 20:21.

⁵⁶ Responsa *Iggerot Moshe, Yoreh Deah* 2:122.

⁵⁷ The *acharonim* in *hilchot gittin* debate whether two names have the status of one long name or two separate names. See *Shulchan Aruch, Even Haezer* 129:1 and commentaries.

⁵⁸ Perhaps an even more interesting question, but one that is beyond the scope of this essay, and beyond the abilities of this author to properly address, is why the custom of two names began. Did it begin in a single community? Was it a result of mass death resulting in fewer children receiving more names? Did it begin with a Yiddish translation of the Hebrew name and develop into two different names? For our purposes, we will only prove that the custom is a relatively recent one and deal with the halachic ramifications of such a new custom.

sources at face value. What follows is a list of possible sources to suggest that the custom to give two names, while virtually non-existent in biblical times⁵⁹, may have begun as early as the times of the Talmud and how the *poskim* address each source.

1. *In the times of the Talmud.* Rabbi Yechezkel Landau boldly declared that “with my weak memory I cannot recall a single instance in *shas*, be it a *tanna* or *amora* who was given two names”.⁶⁰ When discussing names that appear in *tanach*, Rabbi Landau merely says that it “was not so common” to call somebody by two names. In *shas*, he insists, “it was not prevalent at all”. There are, however, several passages in the Talmud that seem to suggest otherwise. Rabbi Landau dealt with some of these sources directly and some are addressed by other authorities.

a. *Rav Oshia Beribi, Rabi Eliezer Hakefar Beribi.* There are several places in *shas* that these names are mentioned⁶¹. On other occasions the name *Beribi* is used alone, indicating that it is a name and not a title.⁶² Rabbi Landau, however, explains that sometimes the word *beribi* is used as a title

⁵⁹ Although we do find biblical figures with multiple names (i.e. Yakov was renamed Yisrael, Moshe had many names, Yitro had many names) we never find anybody called by both names simultaneously.

⁶⁰ Responsa *Noda B'yehudah Tinyana; Orach Chaim* 113.

⁶¹ See *Eruvin* 53a, *Avoda Zara* 43a, *Chullin* 28a, 84b.

⁶² *Chullin* 52b, *Makot* 5b, see *Rashi* there who explains that *Beribi* is the name of an *amora*.

that means this particular person is the greatest of his generation, and on other occasions it is merely a person's name. Rabbi Landau points out that whenever *beribi* is used in conjunction with another name, Rashi comments that it is a reference to the *amora's* standing as a *gadol hador*. When, however, *Beribi* appears alone, Rashi comments that it is the name of a particular *chacham*.⁶³

- b. *Abba Shaul, Abba Yosi*. Rabbi Landau comments that the term *Abba* as used in these names, is merely a title indicating the importance of a person. Rabbi Landau finds support for this in a statement in the Talmud that generally slaves should not be referred to with the title *Abba*, but the slaves of Raban Gamliel were such people of stature, that they may be accorded the title *Abba*.⁶⁴ This comment can also be applied to the wife of Rabi Eliezer who is identified as *Ema Shalom*.⁶⁵

⁶³ Rabbi Landau points out one exception to this rule, in *Chullin* 11b, and points out another difficulty in that gemara, leaving both difficulties unanswered. Rabbi Landau neglects to mention that there are two places in *shas* (*Sotah* 29b, *Chullin* 57a) where *Beribi* is used alone and *Rashi* comments that it refers to other well known *amoraim* (*R' Yosi* and *Chizkiyah*) who are identified by the title *beribi* because they were *gedolei hador*. In both cases, however, it is clear from the context who the subject of the passage is.

⁶⁴ *Berachot* 16b. See *Rashi* there who explains that the terms *Abba* and *Ima* used to be used much the way Mr. and Mrs. are used today.

⁶⁵ See *Bava Metzia* 59b, and comment of Rashash to *Moed Kattan* 20a.

- c. *Ayeh Mari*. The Talmud refers to someone by the name *Ayeh Mari*. Rashi comments that this is the person's *shem chanichah* (surname or nickname).⁶⁶ *Sefer Torat Chesed* comments that one can argue that for a *shem chanichah* people would use two names, but not for a regular name. Furthermore, it could be argued that the name *Ayeh* is a title much like *Abba*.⁶⁷
2. *In the times of the Rishonim*. It is exceedingly rare to find any rabbinic authority from the times of the *rishonim* who had two names. The lone exception is a *ba'al hatosafot* who is mentioned very rarely by the name Yakov Yisrael.⁶⁸ Rav Moshe Sofer cites further proof that the custom used to be to give only one name from a story related by the Maharshal. The Maharshal writes that there was once a dispute between a husband and wife who to name their son after. The husband wanted to name the boy after

⁶⁶ *Gittin* 35a.

⁶⁷ *Torat Chesed Even Haezer* 39 s.v. *ach*.

⁶⁸ Cited in Tosafot *Ketubot* 98b s.v. *amar rav Papa*, and Tosafot *Chullin* 112a s.v. *hani mili*, and *Sefer Hayashar l'Rabeinu Tam, cheilek hashut* 48, 53-54. It should be noted, however, that the names Yakov and Yisrael are a natural fit as they originate with the same biblical figure who had his name changed. This does not provide us with an early source for having two totally unrelated names. In fact, we find many *acharonim* who had two names that naturally went together, very often one Hebrew and one *Yiddish* translation (i.e. Shlomo Zalman, Aryeh Leib, Dov Ber etc.). See also Responsa *Chatam Sofer Even Haezer* II #18 who points out that even Yakov Avinu is never referred to by both names simultaneously.

his father, Meir, while the wife wanted to name for her father, Yair. Since both names contained the root of “*ohr*” (light) they decided to call the child Shneur (two kinds of light) thereby encapsulating the names of both grandfathers.⁶⁹ From the fact that they did not merely call the child Yair Meir (or vice versa) we may deduce that it was not customary to give two names.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ *Yam Shel Shlomo Gittin* 4:26. See there that the Maharshah relates the story with the name Uri in place of the name Yair, but the basic idea remains the same. Interestingly, *Sefer Tiv Gittin*, *Sheimot Anashim*, *shin* writes that this is not the first time in history the name Shneur is found. In fact the Ramban occasionally mentions the name Shneur. Additionally, the Chida, *Ma'arechet Gedolim*, *shin*, *kuntros acharon*, *Shneur*, points out that Rabeinu Yonah refers to a rebbi named Shneur as well. These sources indicate that the name was not invented for the purpose of satisfying both parties in this dispute, but that it served as a convenient method to make peace between the two.

⁷⁰ *Chatam Sofer Even Haezer* 2:18. The proof cited by Chatam Sofer is most difficult because the name of the father of the child in the Maharshah's story was Menachem Tziyon, clearly an indication that some people did have two names. Furthermore, Rav Ahron Silver shlit" from Yerushalayim has pointed out that perhaps giving both names would not have solved the problem as there may have been a subsequent *machloket* which was to be the first name and which would be the second name. See, however, *Nachalat Shivah* 45:21:12 who writes that he has heard that there are places where they give a child two names at the time of his *brit*. He also writes that he actually knew somebody with two names, further indicating that this was not the accepted practice. See also Introduction to *Sefer Tiv Gittin* of Rav Ephraim Zalman Margoliyos who cites all of the above sources and concludes that today it is commonplace for people to have two names. Rav Moshe Feinstein *Iggerot Moshe Orach Chaim* V, 10:3 suggests that the custom originated out of necessity. When Jews were locked in ghettos, and they had to obtain something from outside the ghetto walls, they would have to bribe the guard to allow one of them out. The guard would not let them out unless he was relatively certain that they would not be caught. As such, the guards were unwilling to accept

B. Is there anything wrong with giving two names? Although we have shown that the custom to give two names is of relatively recent vintage, we have not yet addressed the propriety of doing so. In order to properly analyze this question it is important that we distinguish between giving two names in general (after the same person or just picking two names that the parents like), giving two names after two different people, and adding a second name due to illness.

1. Giving two names under normal circumstances. While Rav Yechezkel Landau and Rav Moshe Sofer don't explicitly forbid giving two names, their tone suggests negative feelings toward this custom. Additionally, the Chazon Ish is reported to have disapproved of the custom to give two names (even though he had two names himself).⁷¹ No reason is offered for this opinion, but presumably it is due to the resulting complexities in the laws of *gittin* and because it is a relatively recent custom. It seems that the Chazon Ish is somewhat of a *da'at yachid* on this matter, as the custom to give multiple names is very prevalent and has not

bribes to allow people who only had Jewish names out of the ghetto as this would surely get them caught. Giving a non-Jewish name only for the trip out of the ghetto also would not suffice because one who is not used to their non-Jewish name is also likely to get caught. To counter this problem they began to give people two names, a Jewish and non-Jewish one. They would be called by both names so that they would be used to their non-Jewish names as well in case the need ever arose to use it.

⁷¹ Quoted in Responsa *Teshuvot V'hanhagot* 1:606. See the language used there that suggest that the Chazon Ish was not in favor if the custom but certainly did not forbid it.

been met with any criticism from other leading *poskim*. In fact, Rav Moshe Feinstein was reported to have ruled that although it was certainly inappropriate to start such a practice, since it is not forbidden, any rabbinic objection would certainly go unheeded.⁷²

2. Giving two names after two different people. Assuming that there is no objection to giving a child multiple names, *Sefer Brit Avot* cites The Rav of Staratin who says not to name a child after two different people. In light of the custom to do so, *Brit Avot* suggests that this authority merely meant that one should not name his child for two people who did not get along with each other in their lifetimes.⁷³ This ruling is most likely based on kabbalistic considerations.

Another consideration when giving two names after two different people is that the combination of the two names may be considered a third, independent name, and may not be considered to be after the two people who originally had those names. This point seems to be the subject of conflicting views of the rabbis.

- a. Rabbi Eliezer Silver went so far as to rule that somebody named Yitzchak Isack may name his child Avraham Yitzchak, as the different combination is clearly a totally

⁷² Responsa *Iggerot Moshe, Orach Chaim V*, 10:3.

⁷³ We can prove that there is generally no problem with naming a single child after two different people from the previously cited *Da'at Zekeinim M'ba'alei Hatosafot* regarding Yoseph naming Ephraim, and the story of the Maharshal with the name Shneur.

different name. He proved this from the *pesukim* at the end of *Parshat Matot* where the torah says that Yair the son of Menashe went and captured villages (*chavot*) and these villages were renamed *Chavot Yair*. In contrast the next verse states that Nobach captured Kenat and called it Nobach “after his name”. The addition of the phrase “after his name” suggests that only in Nobach’s case where the name remained exactly the same is it considered “after his name”. In Yair’s case where the title *Chavot* was added, it is not considered to be “after his name”.⁷⁴

- b. The *Da’at Zekeinim M’ba’alei Hatosafot* point out that Yoseph named his son Ephraim after both Avraham and Yitzchak. Avraham refers to himself as *efer* (ashes)⁷⁵ and Yitzchak was like *efer* (ashes) on the *mizbeach*. The name Ephraim means “two *efer*’s (two people referred to as ashes)”.⁷⁶ Implicit in this comment is the notion that one may name for two different people, even if each name is changed.

- 3. Adding a name due to illness. The Talmud teaches us that one of the methods of removing an evil decree is to change one’s

⁷⁴ *Sefer M’shulchan Govoha* end of *Parshat Matot*, as related by Rabbi Isac Osband, Rosh Yeshiva in Telz Yeshiva.

⁷⁵ *Bereishit* 18:27.

⁷⁶ *Da’at Zekeinim M’ba’alei Hatosafot Bereishit* 42:52.

name.⁷⁷ Rav Yosef Cairo records the custom to change one's name in the face of terrible illness in the hope that the decree against the person will be changed.⁷⁸ Many authorities rule that only a person who has attained a lofty spiritual status can change the name that somebody had been given at birth.⁷⁹ For this reason the custom has developed to add a name to a sick person in the hopes that the new name may not be subject to the same decree.

VI. Summary and Conclusion. We have discussed four major issues people face when naming children.

First, we discussed whether the fathers or mother's family should take precedence in supplying the name for the baby. The proper approach in this area varies depending on the community in which one lives and has probably changed over time. Currently, the Ashkenazic practice is to name for the mother's family first, while the Sephardic practice is to name for the father's family first.

Second, there are varying customs regarding whether people should name for family members exclusively or should name for great rabbis as well. While most

⁷⁷ *Rosh Hashanah* 16b, *Ta'anit* 16a, and *Baba Kama* 125a.

⁷⁸ *Beit Yosef Yoreh Deah* 338.

⁷⁹ *Kuntros Ziv Hasheimot* Chapter 28 cites *Sefer Rachamei Av* who writes that the name a person is given at birth is a lifeline for the person, and taking away that name may be the equivalent of cutting off whatever life he has left. See also *Sefer Chasidim* 245. See also *Yalkut Shimoni Yeshaya* 449 that only God is truly qualified to name people.

have the custom to name for family members initially, some have the custom to name for a torah scholar once the names of all of the closest relatives have been perpetuated.

Third, we have discussed the various people who should not be named for. When it comes to naming for people who were not religious Jews, most have the custom to either add a name or slightly change the name. Regarding people who died young, the definition of “dying young” is the subject of considerable debate, and the custom therefore varies. All *poskim* seem to agree, however, that a change in the name or an additional name would resolve any problems with naming for such a person.

Finally, we discussed the custom of giving more than one name to a child. While the origins of this custom remain somewhat unclear, it has become prevalent in most communities with minimal rabbinic opposition. Customs, however, vary regarding naming a child after two different people.

Obviously, the choice of a name, while an important decision, should never be the source of strife in a home, as the lack of *shalom bayit* is likely to damage a child far more than even the least preferable choice of a name.⁸⁰ This essay is not intended to make decisions for people, nor to aid one side of an argument, but merely to organize

⁸⁰ The *Chida* (*Yosef Ometz* page 288, 362) writes that it is especially important to avoid any sort of strife in the house of a newborn and his mother, as this can cause danger to the baby. He then adds that even arguing over the name of the child can be dangerous to the child. See also *Kaf Hachaim, Yoreh Deah* 116:107.

for the reader varying rabbinic viewpoints and sensitivities in choosing an appropriate name.⁸¹

⁸¹ Many of the sources presented in this essay were found in *Kuntros Ziv Hasheimot*, a comprehensive collection of sources relating to names. The author is most grateful to Dr. William Gewirtz for his valuable help in determining the content and style of this essay. The author is also grateful to Rabbi Ahron Silver, Rabbi Jacob J. Schachter and Rabbi Avi Lebowitz for their insightful comments, critiques and additional sources.