

## Is a Rose By Any Other Name or Smell Still a Rose?

Deuteronomy 12:3: (regarding destroying idols) “and you shall destroy their name”.

A. “And destroy their names by giving them contemptuous nicknames. What they call *bet galya* ‘a house of revelation’ you should call *bet karya* ‘a house of concealment’, what they call *ayin kol* ‘the all-seeing eye’ you should call *ayin kotz* ‘the thorn eye’”.  
Rashi: (France & Germany 1040-1105) (based on *Avodah Zara* 46a)

B. “Just as his/her name has been changed, so may the evil decree passed on him/her be changed from justice to mercy, from death to life, from illness to a complete cure”.  
(For similar reasons Ashkenazim do not name babies after the living. Sepharadim also have a name change *Mi she-berakh* but no aversion to naming after the living.)  
Ashkenazi name change “*Mi she-berakh*” (“May the One (i.e. God) who blessed...”, the opening words for various prayers during the Torah reading on behalf of the person called up for an honor, for the ill, etc.)

C. The Bible itself lists name changes for these reasons:

1) destiny: Avram to Avraham, Sarai to Sarah, Jacob to Israel, Hoshe’a to Joshua;

2) idolatry: names ending in “ba’al” (=Canaanite god) to “boshet” (=“shame”) so Eshbaal to Ish-boshet, Merib-baal to Mephiboshet, the judge Jerubaal (=Gideon) to Jerubbeshet, even the goddess Ashtereth (=Astarte) becomes Ashtoreth.

D. More euphemisms (substituting an agreeable word for an indelicate, blasphemous or taboo one) and dysphemisms (replacing an innocuous word with a disparaging one):

1) avoid implicating the speaker: “should you gouge out these men’s eyes” instead of “our eyes” (Numbers 16:14);

2) avoid implication in an oath: “God do so to the enemies of David” when David means “my enemies” (I Samuel 25:12);

3) avoid indelicate and offensive expressions:

a) “die” to “go the way of all the earth” (I Kings 2:2), “walk with God” (Gen 5:24, cf. II Kings 2:3);

b) “defecate” to “cover one’s legs” (Judges 3:24; I Samuel 24:3); “dung” to “filth”, and “urine” to “water of the legs” (II Kings 18:27); “hemorrhoids” or “tumors” to “strain from the rectum” (dysentery?) (Deuteronomy 28:7);

c) “rape” to “lie with” (Deuteronomy 28:3, others);

4) honor God: e.g. “The Lord remained standing before Abraham” to (Abraham remained standing before the Lord” (Genesis 18:22) (for various lists see: *Mekhilta: Shirah* 6; *Sifrei* Numbers 84; *Tanḥuma B’shalah* 16; Genesis Rabbah 49:7; Exodus Rabbah 13:1);

5) in Talmudic literature: to avoid offending sensibilities and to refine language by avoiding vulgar expressions:

a) “another thing” for a variety of words--“pig”, “leprosy”, “immorality”, “idolatry”; (in one case in Rav’s presence a student substituted “kid” for “another thing” (which was itself a substitute for “swine”—*P’sahim* 3b);

- b) “blind person” to “with excess light”;
  - c) also for bathroom, sexual terms, and death;
  - d) also for idolatry, idolatrous sites, and idolatrous practices (instead of the Biblical “shame” they usually use);
  - e) “opening one’s mouth to Satan” (*B’rakhof* 19a), not inviting misfortune by ominous statements, i.e. not tempting fate, so “Israel” to “the enemies of Israel” (*Sukkah* 29a; Leviticus Rabbah 25:1); “and every trouble which shall come on Israel” to “and every trouble which shall *not* come on Israel” (*P’sahim* 117a); in Exodus 1:10 it reads in the third person: “and it [the people of Israel] shall go up from the land”, which the rabbis understand as Pharaoh meant to say, “and we shall [be forced to] go up from the land,” and they will possess it, “but it is like one who curses oneself and hangs the curse on someone else” (*Sotah* 11a).
- 6) vernacular Yiddish expressions:
- a) Jewish wedding *haseneh* while a non-Jewish wedding is a *hashlereh* (a nonsense word);
  - b) prayer house *bes tfileh* while a church is *bes tifleh*, “a house of abomination.

E. The first conventional belief with which all of us -- and I include myself -- have been raised is that Jewish survival and, above all, Jewish vitality, in the past have derived in large measure from a tenacious adherence on the part of our ancestors to all basic external traditional forms. This view has perhaps been best expressed in a renowned sermon delivered by Bar Kappara in the latter part of the second century (and repeated in subsequent centuries with some minor variations). The original statement seems to have been: "Owing to four factors were the people of Israel redeemed from the land of Egypt: they did not alter their names [i.e., Egyptianize them]; they did not change their language; they did not spread malicious gossip; and they were free of sexual license." The ancient preacher adduced scriptural proof (for him, the equivalent of archaeological findings) for at least two of his assertions. First, he pointed out, the Israelites in Egypt obviously kept their Hebrew names, since they were known as Reuben and Simeon when they arrived in Egypt and they were identified by the same names at the time of the Exodus. And second, they did not change their tongue, since from the biblical account it is obvious that they spoke Hebrew.

Popular historical reading of the past even went a step further and, curiously enough, distorted the dictum to affirm that there were just *three* factors that enabled our ancestors to be redeemed from Egypt. First, they retained their names; second, they [147] adhered to their ancestral tongue; and-notice the third -- *shelo shinu et malbushehem*, they even retained their distinctive form of clothing.

Now, whatever the merits of this sermon, or of the popular distortion of the sermon, with regard to Jacob's children, it was hardly true for Jacob's grandchildren, for they soon acquired very fashionable Egyptian names like Aaron, Moses, Hofni, and Phineas. While to many, these seem authentic Hebrew names, they were, we know today, originally Egyptian names that our ancestors appropriated and Hebraized. Nor were they the last generation of Israelites to adopt foreign names for themselves. Throughout the biblical period, many a pious Israelite selected a name for his child from the fund of names familiar to him in the Semitic milieu in which he lived: Ishbaal, Abijam, Daniel,

and Zerubbabel, to mention a few. And after the Hellenization of the Near East, Jews adopted Greek names. All of us, at one time or another, have heard that Judah Maccabee was a staunch opponent of Hellenism; yet when the time came for him to choose ambassadors to Rome who could best represent his Hebraic policies, he chose two good Jews with the names of Jason and Eupolemos. Later, we find names like Alexander, Aristobulus, Antigonus, Dositheos, Hyrcanus, Symmachus, Tryphon (pronounced in Hebrew as "Tarfon"), and so on, endlessly. Thus, our ancestors certainly did adapt their names to their own times. Sometimes they were very much like ourselves and wrote Menahem in Hebrew documents and Paregoros in Greek ones. It is obvious that by the time of the Mishnah, the practice of adopting foreign names had become so prevalent that it evoked Bar Kappara's sermon in response.

The sermon, however, did not put a stop to the tendency. The poets, rabbis, and philosophers of medieval Judeo-Arabic society were men who very often bore Arabic names in addition to-or as far as we know, sometimes even without-Hebrew names. In the Jewish society of Latin Europe, which supposedly was immune to the temptations of creeping assimilation, we find [148] rabbis with such names as Astruc, Vives, Vidal, Bonfils, and Peter, while their daughters would occasionally be named Bellette rather than Yafah.

In other words, Jews did adopt names in accordance with the regnant fashions of their times. Moreover, not only did they adopt new names; they also adopted new languages. It was Yehezkel Kaufmann who, I believe, first pointed out that of all peoples of the Western world, only the Jews have had no one language that throughout their history could be characterized as their own. Ironically, Kaufmann made his point by writing in Hebrew.... (Gerson Cohen, 1924-1991, USA, former JTS chancellor, Columbia professor, *The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History*)

### **Comments and questions:**

*These teachings assume that names have power. Accordingly, names can be used destructively or constructively. The original underlying concept was that the name and the thing itself are one. God creates by calling forth the thing by its name. Humans establish dominion over the creatures and the world by Adam's naming the individual components. To know an object is to know its essence. This principle underlies all the magic stories: knowing something's or someone's true name gives you power over it.*

*Rashi (A) is the opening to this discussion. By using contemptuous nicknames, one changes their reality. Compare (C) and (D), which also adds other criteria like destiny. Hence, (B), changing one's name changes one's destiny, and the angel of death may overlook the one whose name was changed. Accordingly, common new names for the ill are Hayyim ("life" in Hebrew) and for a child Alter ("old" in Yiddish), thereby confusing the angel of death and their destinies. So naming after the dead, besides the feelings of continuity and honoring the deceased, also has the effect of resurrecting the dead or at least invoking, or defying, destiny. A convert also gets a new name and destiny.*

*Another example of the power of names: On 17 August 1938 the Nazis decreed that*

*Jewish male newborns must be given names from a list of 185 forenames, and female newborns from one containing only 95 names, and all Jews born before 1 January 1939 must assume the additional name of Israel for a male and of Sarah for a female.*

**How much do you really believe in destiny and in the power of speech and names? Does your name say something about you? What does this say about using nicknames?**

*The importance of language in Judaism also adds cleanliness of speech, avoids insults, and avoids offending people and sensibilities. The rabbis were not always consistent in how they applied language, though, and were well aware of the limits of confusing people by not being specific for it can create misunderstandings. We live in an age that likes to name things by their proper names. **Do we lose something by avoiding euphemisms? Are dysphemisms always bad? Is there value to “clean” speech? While political correctness (PC) has as its source the hope not to offend, can it go too far? Does PC at some point become paternalism (kind, wise, and protective governing of a group) or “nannyism” (defined by U.S. News and World Report as “the irrepressible urge toward do-good coercion”—think NCAA ban on “hostile or abusive” nicknames and mascots, without consulting Native Americans—which smacks of paternalism)?***

**Given all of this, what would Judaism say about William Shakespeare’s phrase, “What’s in a name? that which we call a rose By any other name would smell as sweet;”? Would we agree, or would we say that it may not be a rose any more?**

*Gerson Cohen raises a whole new series of issues. He argues assimilation has its positive aspects. On the other hand, we also have Bil’am’s prophecy, “There is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations” (Numbers 23:9), and “even the liberal thinker [Franz] Rosenzweig [(according to Commentary Magazine the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most influential Jewish thinker)] worried that the Jewish people would lose its distinctive greatness if it ‘re-entered history’ as a political state” (Etz Hayim, p. 901). **Do we need some assimilation? How much assimilation is too much, and how much is not enough?***