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Family Legacies

Linking the past with the present and the future
Jewish Genealogical Society of Southern Nevada, Inc.

Ashkenazic Family Names Origin and Development

By Isaac Goldberg

It is safe to say that throughout Jewish history, until the French Revolution and the ensuing breakdown of the ghetto walls, most Jews had no family name as we know the concept. The Mishnah and Talmud sages were known by their "first name ben (or bet for daughters) father's name". So in the Middle Ages - Judah ben Samuel, ha-Hasid; Baruch ben Samuel of Mainz, etc. Ashkenaz is the name applied to the Jewish communities of Germany, France and Bohemia. Ashkenazi Jewry also included the Jews of Poland and Russia, most of whom immigrated from Germany. The most outstanding mark of Ashkenazi Jewry was what is known today as Yiddish, a language deriving mostly from Middle High German, and still spoken by some Ashkenazi Jews.

In German Ashkenazi documents, few family names occur. In Hebrew official documents (such as a 'get' -- divorce), only names used by Jews among Jews were admissible, i.e. making the "get" "kosher." When persons having the same Hebrew names (a strong possibility!) were involved in the divorce, family names supplemented the Hebrew names. Accordingly, family names in North European documents are sporadic before the second half of the 18th century.

With the new order, governments (of duchies, petty kingdoms and other political entities) were faced with the problem - financial as well as administrative - of adding these new "citizens" to local tax rolls. This created a serious name problem. For example, there was the problem of how to handle several households where the heads had the same name - Isaac ben Jacob.

It is an irony of Jewish history that Austrian Emperor Joseph II, the son of the arch Anti-Semite Maria Theresa, a bigoted and fanatic ruler who couldn't stand Jews, was a very tolerant and liberal ruler. He permitted Jews to study handicrafts, to engage in agriculture and wholesale commerce, and admitted them into the universities and the army. In 1787, he issued an edict ordering the Jews of Galicia and Bukovina to adopt permanent family names, the first such law in Europe. Prussia occupied Warsaw from 1794-1806 and imposed German-sounding names on its Polish Jews. Laws ordering Jews to assume fixed family names were passed also in Frankfurt, Baden, Westphalia and others. In 1808, Napoleon decreed a similar requirement for all Jews in his empire. In the Russian Empire, the Czar Alexander initiated this policy in 1804, finalizing it in 1845. These new regulations were intended to expedite the levying of taxes and the conscription of Jewish soldiers.

For the government officials in charge, the granting and registering of names proved a new way of extorting money from Jews. Fine-sounding names derived from flowers and gems (Rosenthal, (valley of roses), Lilienthal (vale of lilies), Edelstein (beautiful stone), Diamant (Diamond), Saphir (Sapphire) came at a high price. Those who could not afford to pay were stuck with names like Schmalz (grease), Eselkopf (donkey's head) etc. The policy was to "Germanize" the names.

Where Jews could manage by some device or other to escape the interference of the authorities and choose their own names, they resorted to several methods.

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1. Caste or Function

A popular procedure was to draw on their religious caste or function, i.e. *Kohen* and its various forms such as: Cohen, Katz (from kohen tzedek), Kaplan, Kagan, Kahan, and Kahn. It was widely believed that Kohanim and curly-haired people as being quick tempered, giving rise to names such as: Kraushaar (German for curly hair), Duchan, Duchen or Duchin (from "dukhening" the Yiddish for the Kohanim ritual blessing).

Levi developed in various forms such as: Levy, Levin, Levine, Levinsky, Levitansky, Levitsky, Levinson, Levitt or Segal (an abbreviation for Segan Levi, "assistant of the Levites"). Among the variations of Segal are: Zoegell, Chagall, and Segalowitz.

2. Profession

Occupations were an important source for forming new family names. Some are: Cantor, Kantor, and Singer; Fleischer & Fleischmann (butcher); Beck, Becker, Backer, Baker (baker) -- Pekarsky in Russian is from *pekar* = baker; Breuer (brewer); Weber (weaver); Kramer (merchant); Wechsler (money changer); Goldschmidt (goldsmith); Brenner (distiller); Gerber (tanner); Shub, from Shohet-u-Bodek (slaughterer & inspector/tester); Schechter (ritual slaughterer); Resnick (Slavic for slaughterer); Lehrer (teacher); Schneider for tailor; Saltzman and Saltman (spicehandler); Farber (painter); Sandler & Schuster (shoemaker); Fiedler (fiddler); Grajek in Polish, Geiger in German; Gottesdiener (God's server); Hegedus in Hungarian; Wassermann, Waterman (waterman).

3. Patronymics & Matronymics

The simplest way of choosing a family name was to create a patronym by adding the suffix -sohn in German, -vitch in Russian. Also -ov, -off, -eff, and -kin to denote "descendant of".

From the father: Isaac -- Isaacs, Isaacson, Itzik, Eisen; Jacob -- Jacobs, Jacobsen, Jacobson, and Jacobowitz; Abraham -- Abrams, Abramson; Mendel -- Mendelson; David -- Davidson

From the mother: Sarah -- Sarasohn, Sarlin, Sarkin; Greta -- Gretz, Graetz; Rivka (Rebecca) -- Rivkin; Batya -- Baskin, Basin; Hora (Czech for mountain) -- Horovitz; Man, Manis, Manes, Manes -- Manischewitz; Margaret -- Margaretten.

Sometimes a man would forsake both his parents to go with his wife: Dienesman ("husband of Dinah"); Hodesmann ("husband of Hadassah"); Perlman ("Husband of Perl").

4. Place of Origin

Many Jews took their family names from their place of origin, so we find innumerable provinces, cities, villages all over Germany, Austria, western Russia, Hungary and other countries among Jewish surnames: Auerbach; Bamberger, Baumberger; Brody; Dreyfuss (Alsatian corruption of Treves); Dresner (Dresden); Spiro (Speyer from Speyer, whence also Shapiro, Schapiro, Spiro); Lasker; Horowitz (Slavic: Gurovitz); Frankfurter; Wiener (from Vienna); Landau from London; Pinsky, Pinsker (from Pinsk); Frank (from Franconia) -- some say it's like Frankel, a sobriquet for Ephraim; Weil; Schwab from Swabia; Pollack from Poland; Littauer from Lithuania; Schlesinger from Silesia.

It is not always easy to determine whether a particular name stems from a town or not. Thus, Steinberg, Goldberg, Greenberg, and Rosenberg happen to be names of real places, but Levinstein and Aronthal are not. Nor does the possession of a place name mean that the bearer actually came from there. The family name Berlin has, in most cases, nothing to do with the German city. It is a patronymic of Ber or Berl. Berlin simply means "the son of Berl." And the family name London is really the Hebrew word "lamden" (scholar) by which the bearer was known in the Jewish community. But the naming authority confused London with Lamden.

Outgrowths of place names were names based on house-signs. Since in many towns, streets were not named and not numbered, houses bore signs based either on the owner's first name: Wolf; Lion, Lyon, Leon; fruits (apple, Apfel); flower (Blum, Bloom, Blumenfeld); mirror (Spiegel); eagle (Adler). The most prominent, of course, was Rothschild (red shield).

5. Acronyms from Hebrew letters

Examples: Schach, from Shabbetia Kohan; Bach, from Beth Chadash (a book by Joel Sirkes); Malbim, from Meir Leib ben Jehiel Michel (Rabbi & Bible commentator); Brann, from Ben Rabbi Nahman; Braff, from Ben Rabbi Feivel; Bash and Basch, from Ben Shimshon; Brasch, from Ben Rav Shimshon;

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Metz and Matz, from Moreh (Moshe) Tsedek (teacher of righteousness); Schalit and Shalit, from Sheyihye le-orekh yamim tovim (May he live long and good times); Wallach, from Veahavta le-reyakha kamocho (love your neighbor as yourself).

6. Vernacular

Sometimes the Hebrew first name was translated into the vernacular: The idea of "peace" from Solomon and Shalom was carried over into the name Fried and Friedman; so you'd get: Shalom – Friedman; Gedaliah – Grossman; Itzik – Lachman; Tuviah – Goodman; Shimshon - Starkman (strength); Meir - Lichtman (light).

Other names of interest are: Gross or Grois - big; Grosz or Nagy (Hungarian); Duzy (Polish); Gold and its derivatives - Zlato (Rus/Polish); Aranyi (Hungarian); Einstein - patronymic of Ein (Hayyim); Einhorn - unicorn (German); Rubin & its derivatives - ruby (stone of tribe Reuben); Pomerantz - orange /bitter orange (Russian & Polish); Margolis (Margalit) – Pearl; Frank or Frankel - sobriquet for Ephraim; Okin or Okun - (Russian for perch). The name Alter and Altman (old man) comes from a secondary name given often to a child born posthumously or born after a sibling dies, to fool the evil eye.

In some cases, names were simply invented out of whole cloth; in others they were taken from characters in the popular literature of the day (Sternberg, Morgenthau). In many communities in Hungary, the Jews were divided into four groups, and each group was assigned the name Weiss (white), Schwartz (black), Gross (big), and Klein (small) respectively.

Even the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service had a hand in changing and Americanizing these European surnames. Many Cohens are not really Cohanim. If the original name sounded too foreign or too difficult to pronounce or write, the clerk at Ellis Island wrote down "Cohen" if the name began with a "K" sound. So also for Levi/Levy for difficult names that began with an "L." In many cases, where the original name was many syllables, the clerk just wrote down the first syllable of the name and left it truncated.

Hollywood too had its negative influence on Jewish names. Many performers changed their names to attract a larger audience and to avoid discrimination

against their Jewishness. Performers transformed themselves from Milton Berlinger to Milton Berle, Fanny Borach to Fanny Brice, Isser Danielovitch to Kirk Douglas, Julius Garfinkle to John Garfield, Emanuel Goldberg to Edward G. Robinson, Joseph Levitch to Jerry Lewis, Judith Tuvim to Judy Holliday, Asa Yoelson to Al Jolson, Theodosia Goodman to Theda Bara, Sonia Kalish to Sophie Tucker, Isidor Iskowitch to Eddie Cantor, Irving Lahrheim to Bert Lahr, Israel Baline to Irving Berlin.

7. Israel Family Names

After discussing Diaspora family names, let's turn to the Holy Land and explore the make-up of common Israeli names. Many Diaspora names underwent some cosmetic changes, either by Hebraicisation i.e. translating, or shortening, i.e. dropping the Diaspora suffix such as "vich," "witz," etc. The most prominent and familiar personage is of course David Ben-Gurion; whose original name was Green. He used the consonants "g," "r," and "n" and chose the name of an ancient Palestinian leader, Gurion. The second Israeli Prime Minister, Isaac Ben-Zevi, was originally Isaac Shimshelwitz, son of Zevi Shimshelwitz. He changed to Isaac Ben-Zevi, using his father's forename. Moshe Chertok, first Minister of Foreign Affairs, used the consonants of his surname and became Moshe Sharett (server). A former Prime Minister, Levi Eshkol, was born Levi Shkolnik. A well-known historian Michael Friedman became Michael Ish-Shalom (Man of Peace). The name Goldberg has many permutations: Har-Zahav, Harpaz, Ophir, Pazy, Zahavy. Shimon Peres was originally Shimon Persky. Morgenstern became Shahar (dawn) or Ben-Shahar, Gottesman became Yediyah (God's friend or man of God). So Jewish family names are still evolving and adapting to fit the times. But with the state of Israel and a more civilized world, Jewish names are changing naturally, for meaningful reasons, not from external forces or internal fears, not bent or forced into strange shapes and meanings.

This article is adapted from a talk by Professor Isaac Goldberg to the Sisterhood of Congregation Etz Hayim, Arlington-Fairfax, Virginia, in September 1996. Professor Goldberg lives in Israel, but Eric Okin, the congregation's president received specific permission from a relative living in the U. S. to print this in "Family Legacies". Our thanks go to Mr. Okin.

The Wonderful World of Jewish Women's Names

By James Koenig

Relatively few women's names appear in the TaNaKH (Hebrew Bible), especially when compared with the vast numbers of men's names. To compensate for this shortfall, Jews of Central and Eastern Europe created a large number of additional feminine names, based on words from several European languages.

Not all Biblical names were considered appropriate for Jewish children. This reflected the context in which the biblical person appeared. Among the unsuitable feminine names are Delilah, Hagar and Jezebel. This process further reduced the list to perhaps forty. By comparison, many more than 100 masculine Hebrew names have been in regular or occasional use during the last couple of centuries.

The most common feminine names taken from the TaNaKH historically have been (using modern English spelling):

- The four matriarchs: Sarah (-possibly meaning 'noble' or 'princess'), Rebecca (possibly meaning to bind'), Leah ('languid'), and Rachel ('a ewe')
- Miriam ('drops of seawater' or 'sea of bitterness'), sister of Moses
- Jacob's daughter Dinah ('judgement')
- The prophet and Judge of Israel, Deborah ('a bee')
- Ruth (possibly 'a companion'), a woman of Moab, who became the wife of Boaz, and thus an ancestor of King David
- Elisheva ('God is my oath'), wife of Aaron
- Tsipporah ('a bird'), Moses' non-Ethiopian wife
- Hannah ('favored'), wife of Elkhanah and other of the priest Samuel
- The heroine of the book of Esther, a.k.a. Hadassah ('myrtle'; the Persian name Esther may alternatively be derived from the word for 'star' or the name of the goddess Ishtar)
- Bilhah (possibly 'weak,' 'old'), one of Jacob's concubines and the mother of his son Naphtali
- Yocheved ('God is glorious'), daughter of Levi
- Abigail ('father of exaltation'), a sister of King David
- Batsheva ('daughter of the oath') who became a wife of King Solomon
- This list comes to 16. To these may be added another 10 names in occasional use:

- Peninah ('coral,' also used for 'pearl') another wife of Elkhanah
- Michal ('a brook'), a daughter of King Saul, married to King David
- Zilpah ('sprinkled water'), another concubine of Jacob's, mother of Asher, Dan and Gad
- Tamar ('a date palm'), both the daughter-in-law of Judah, and a daughter of King David
- Eva (perhaps cognate with Chaya, 'living'), the first woman
- Naomi ('pleasantness'), mother-in-law of Ruth
- Haphzibah ('my delight is in her'), wife of King Hezekiah of Judah
- Judith ('a woman from Judea') the heroine who killed the Assyrian general Holofernes in the apocryphal Book of Judith
- Yael (either 'a female goat' or 'sent by God'), the heroine who kills the Canaanite general Sisera
- Shulamit ('peacefulness' - compare with masculine name Shalom), mentioned in Song of Solomon.

Several Hebrew (or possibly Aramaic) names were added in post-Biblical times to this list of 26.

They include:

- Shoshanah, from the Hebrew word for 'lily', sometimes used for 'rose' or even a generic 'flower'
- Chaya, the feminine of Chaim, signifying 'life'
- Malkah, Hebrew 'queen'
- Barucha, feminine of Baruch, 'blessed'
- Margalith, Hebrew 'pearl'
- Menukha, Hebrew 'rest,' 'peace'
- Simcha, both a masculine and feminine name, meaning 'joy'
- Ziona, feminine of Zion, the promised land
- Tovah, feminine of Tovia, meaning 'good'

Note that these names have attractive (and supposedly feminine) meanings or inferred meanings.

In addition, Yohanah and Josefa were created as feminine versions of the Biblical names Yohanan ('God has been gracious') and Joseph ('God will add'). Tsviya (often transposed as Tsviya) was created as the feminine of Tsvi, Hebrew 'deer,' which in turn was an attribute describing Naphtali.

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Together these total 38 feminine names derived from Hebrew and in occasional or regular use among Eastern and Central European Jewish families during the last couple of centuries.

(A new suite of Hebrew woman's names has been created in the past century, mostly in Israel, such as Batyah, Irit and Ganit. These are beyond the scope of this brief article.)

Through the centuries of Diaspora, Jews adopted given names in the languages of the various countries in which they lived. Most of these names were discarded once the family emigrated to another country, and replaced with a name in the language of the new county. This process continues today. However, certain words in the various European languages developed into Yiddish language names for women. The words from which the Yiddish names developed were not necessarily used as names by the local population.

The most common of these are:

- Beyla/Beile: from the French 'belle' or Italian 'bella,' meaning 'beautiful'
- Bluma/Blume: from the German 'flower' (modern German 'blume')
- Breyna/Breine: probably from the German for 'brown' and suggesting 'brown-haired' (modern German 'braun')
- Dobre/Dubra: If not a distortion of Devora (Deborah), from the Czech or Ukrainian 'dobra', meaning 'good'
- Feyga/Feige: from the German for 'bird' (modern German 'vogel')
- Frieda: from the German for 'peace' (modern German 'freude')
- Fruma/Frume: from the German for 'pious' (modern German 'fromm')
- Glika/Glike: from the German for 'happiness' (modern German 'glouck')
- Golda/Golde: from the German for 'gold' (modern German 'gold')
- Gruna/Grune/Grine: probably from the German for 'green,' suggesting a garden or spring (modern German 'grun')
- Gutte: from the German for 'good' (modern German 'gutte')
- Hinde: from the German for 'a doe' (modern German 'gutte')

- Kreyna/Kreine/Kroine: from the German for 'a crown,' possibly suggesting 'a heavenly crown,' or a 'queen' (modern German 'hinde')
- Liebe/Liba: possibly from the German for 'love' (modern German 'liebe') or from the Ukrainian 'love' (modern Ukrainian 'lyubov'). Note also the occasional spelling Liebe/Leybe, which may be a feminine of Leib, I turn derived from German 'lion' (modern German 'lowe').
- Perl/Perle: from the German for 'pearl' (modern German 'perle')
- Reyna/Reine: from the French for 'queen' (modern French 'reine')
- Roza/Rose: either from Italian for 'a rose' (modern Italian 'rose') or from the German for 'a rose' (modern German 'rose') or 'pink-cheeked' (modern German 'rose')
- Sheyna/Sheine: from the German for 'lovely,' 'pretty' (modern German 'schon')
- Shprinza/Shprintse: probably from the Spanish for 'hope' (modern Spanish 'esperanza') or indirectly from Latin, 'hope' (Roma feminine name Sperantia)
- Taube: from the German for 'dove' (modern German 'taube')
- Yenta/Yentl: from the French for 'kind,' 'good,' 'nice' (modern French 'gentil'). Note that this originally signified 'of noble birth.'
- Yetta: perhaps a diminutive of Henrietta (feminine of Henry, from the Old German 'home ruler'); or of Esther or Judith (rather than a borrowed word from another language)
- Zelda: possibly from Middle German, meaning 'well-being,' 'contentment'
- Zisl/Zusl: from the German for 'sweet' (modern German 'suss')
- Zlata/Zlote: from the Czech for 'gold' (modern Czech 'zlata'), suggesting either 'riches' or 'golden-haired'

This list comes to 26 names. Together with those from Hebrew they total 64. Although this is still not as numerous as the masculine Hebrew names in regular use, it does offer greater scope in name-giving than previously.

Several items should be noted.

1. Students of names ('onomasts') differ radically (and sometimes angrily) among themselves over the origin of many of these names.

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Therefore, don't be alarmed if your favorite reference cites a different derivation for a particular name.

2. Certain of the Yiddish names are cognates ('calques') of Hebrew names. For example, Feige and Tsipporah ('a bird'), Perl and Margalit ('a pearl'), Reyna and Malkah ('queen'), Roza (and even Bluma) and Shoshanah (various types of flowers), and Freyda and Simcha ('joy').
3. Most of the Yiddish names (as is the case with the post-Biblical Hebrew names) have meanings that are considered to be attractive or desirable feminine traits: goodness, piety, beauty, peacefulness, happiness, etc. The Biblical Hebrew names often have religious meanings, although many are of obscure origin.
4. Each of the listed names can be pronounced and spelled differently than shown, depending upon the dialect of Yiddish or the diminutive used, or the type of transliteration into Roman letters. Sarah may appear as Sara, Sare, Sarerlo, Serle, Serke, Shere, Shore, Sore, Sosye, Sure, Surke, Tserl, Tserke and Tsure, with many other possible variants.
5. Some diminutives are almost unrecognizable to American genealogists, especially those that are based on the final syllable of the name, rather than the initial syllable. As an example of this, a Ukrainian Yiddish diminutive of Esther is transliterated as Fira: the diminutive is formed from the final syllable; there is no 'th' in Ukrainian or Yiddish, so 'f' is used instead; the 'e' and 'i' vowel sounds are almost interchangeable; and a feminine ending 'a' is added.
6. Therefore, one should not jump to conclusions when making correlations or identifications.

Certain English or German names became closely associated with specific Yiddish or Hebrew names, so closely that immigrants to America or Great Britain often used one as a substitute of the other. Examples are: Jennie for Sheine; Marianne or Mary for Miriam; Anna or Ann for Hannah; Susan for Shoshanah; Elizabeth or Liza for Elisheva; Belle for Beile; Libby for Liebe; Margaret for Margalit; Fanny for Feige; Cecilia for Tsivya/Tsviya; and Etta for Yetta. Some of these are just the direct English equivalent of

a Hebrew name (Susan, Elizabeth and Anna), whereas others merely sound similar. Other individuals have used the calque (translation) of a Hebrew or Yiddish name: Joy for Simcha or Freyda; Flora or Lily/Lillian or Rose for Bluma and Shoshanah; and even Birdie for Tziporah or Feige.

Many immigrants took secular (non-Hebrew, non-Yiddish) names while living in Europe and these names often were retained in America: Bertha, Charlotte or Lotte, Sophie, Emiloyl, Henrietta, Gertrude or Trudy, Helene. Other families adopted feminine names that they perceived to be very American, but in reality tended to be thought of as 'Jewish': Rhodak, Myrna, Arlene, Minnie (a diminutive of Minerva-Francine, Cydelle and Selma. However, none of these is derived from either Hebrew or Yiddish. (The same is true of such masculine names as Sheldon, Irving, Seymour, Morris, Murray, Marvin and Melvin, popular among immigrants and their children.)

Several nicknames derived from Biblical Hebrew or Yiddish became accepted as given names: Sally and Sadie from Sarah; Shellie and Rochelle from Rachel; Lee from Leah; Mimi from Miriam; Abbie or Abby from Abigail; and Riva and Reba from Rebecca, among others.

Today almost anything is considered acceptable—Hebrew names, Yiddish names, Gaelic and English family names (Kelly, Stacy, Whitney), made-up names, foreign place names (Brittany, Paris), Russian names, names from almost any language. The only thing that can be said about names that the future generations will adopt is that they will be interesting.

"The most remarkable feature of the personal names of Ashkenazic Jewry is their sheer ingenuity." - John Geipel

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Jewish Names on the Internet

Type in "Jewish Names" in any search engine (google, dogpile, etc.) and explore the many articles available on Jewish names.

Jewishgen.org has information about names in their InfoFiles. Also at this site are various SIGs (Special Interest Groups) that have name information on their pages.

www.avotaynu.com is a site that sells books of interest to Jewish genealogists including many books on Jewish given names and surnames.

Jewish Given Names
www.jewishgen.org

Sephardic Jewish Names
<http://www.orthohelp.com/geneal/yohasin.HTM>

Behind the Name
<http://www.behindthename.com/nmc/jew.html>

Jewish Given Names Found in
Les Noms Des Israélites en France
<http://www.ellipsis.cx/~liana/names/levy>

Bulgarian Jewish Names
Based on Moscona, I.: The Origin of the Jewish
Bulgarian Names. 1967
<http://www.sephardicstudies.org/b-names.html>

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