

## **Naming Traditions and Replacement Phenomena among Jews and in Israel**

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In this short piece, I want to describe how traditional Jewish naming practices are part of a wider web of replacement phenomena of having a “name” or being forgotten. While replacement child refers to specific situation where a child comes to replace a dead one, replacement phenomena refer to a broader series of situations which are in some ways similar but do not fall into the traditional definition of a replacement child.

### **First some background.**

The Jewish world is divided into two main branches: Ashkenazi Jews and Sephardi Jews. There are actually many more sub-families, Jews from Yemen, from Italy, once even in Saudi Arabia and China. But by far, most belong to the two main types. Ashkenazi Jews traditional origins lies in the Rhineland, then a great center for Jewish learning, which suffered genocidal attacks by Crusaders which wiped out entire communities. From there, they spread through Eastern Europe, Russia; their language was Yiddish, a Germanic language heavily influenced by Hebrew. Sephardic Jews have their historical origins in the forced expulsions from Spain and Portugal at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. From the Iberian peninsula, they went into exile into Holland, France, all of the Mediterean and Ottoman lands, and later the New World. The first Jews allowed to return to England by Cromwell, after their expulsion in 1300, were Sephardic Jews from Amsterdam. Their language was Ladino, which is Spanish tongue, also influenced by Hebrew.

Naming practices of Ashkenazi and Sepharadi Jews are remarkably similar with one key difference. Both name boys at the circumcision at eighth day following the birth; names of girls are announced at the afternoon service on the Hebrew Sabbath. Traditionally Ashkenazi Jews will exclusively name their children after a dead relative. And in this sense all Ashkenazi Jews are replacement children, strengthening the ancestral bonds between the generations. I am an Ashkenazi Jew and I a named for my maternal grandfather, who died when my mother was four year old. All of her siblings named a child for him as well. Our names vary and some are in the

feminine and some in the masculine but the intension is clear that his name not die out. For then, he would die twice. In turn, I named my eldest daughter after my mother, who died suddenly, in my arms, when I was twenty. She knows that she is named for her and I tell her about her, her characteristics, that she is so proud of her, looking down from somewhere.

Sephardic Jews also name their children after dead relatives but they also name them after a living relative, such as a father or grandmother, to honor them. Difficulties arise when there is an inter-communal marriage, especially when say, two grandmothers, one each side, one living, one dead share the same name. If the new parents select name of a living Ashkenazi relative, then this is tantamount to mystical murder since in that culture to name is to memorialize. In a sense, to want them to be dead. This tragedy did happen in my family and the two sides of the family never spoke again. These naming practices are still very common among religious families who follow a halakhic way of life, keeping the Sabbath, eating only kosher and the rest of 613 commandments. But significantly, contemporary secular Israelis have any entirely different naming pattern. They rarely name for the dead. Rather, they prefer Biblical names not necessarily traditionally associated with Hebrew tradition, like Hagar or Absalom. But even more, they like to make up new names, especially very short, gender free names, associated with nature. "Tal", for example, means dew and is now not only a popular name for boys and girls but also popular as a family name. Names are not chosen for their ancestral or replacement value but for their sound and rhythm. In my other hat as an anthropologist, I have studied contemporary naming practices in Israel and discovered that new names reflected the Zionist ideology of the "new" and a rejection of the old exile mentality. Here, too, marriage between Israelis and traditionalists can be a source of naming tension. One of my Canadian cousins married an Israeli holocaust child survivor who had grown up on a Kibbutz. When their first daughter was born, the name was announced: Dahlia. Dahlia is an extremely common Israeli name, derived from the Swedish botanist who investigated the flower. When the name was announced, everyone in the family asked the mother, "Who is the child named for?" It was inconceivable that a child would not be a memorial candle. But she said in typical Israeli fashion, "Oh, I just liked the sound of the name." The family was shocked and it created a rift that was never healed.

There are a few more naming phenomena I want to discuss. The first concerns naming practices of many holocaust survivors who came to Israel following the end of the second world war. Most of these people had lost most if not all of their extended family, often their own spouses and children. Many were able to reconstruct a new life and emerge from the ashes like the phoenix. The dilemma became what to call their new children. Dina Vardi in her moving book *Memorial Candles*, shows how some second generation survivors were named for up to 24 deceased relatives; having to make up for an entire lost extended family. In a more psychological way, their life as the second generation did not belong to themselves, but was devoted to making up for the parents' loss and there was no justification for pleasure, play or fun. Even worse, disobedience of any sort was related backwards as in the oft heard phrase, "For this I survived Auschwitz so that you could..." Their names forced them to live always in the shadow of Auschwitz.

All of these names memorialized but were specifically imbued with survivor guilt: "Why do I live, when my wonderful aunt who was so much better than me does not." Significantly, the worldfamous memorial and museum of the holocaust in Jerusalem, Yam vaShem, means a 'place (literally, a hand) and name. On Holocaust memorial days, names of the dead are read out aloud in public spaces.

Naming may also have a magical property. In the West, we expect people to more or less stay with the same name (except perhaps name change for women after marriage) all their life. But this is not true in many cultures. As a person goes through life cycle and ritual initiations, their identity and name changes with them. In many cultures, your name changes after you die and your 'life name' may even become taboo to say. In contrast, in Judaism, there is a 'life name' must be changed to prevent death. When a person is very ill, it is not unusual to change the person's name or to add a new name, especially Chaim, which means life. This practice is based on the idea that the name embodies a person's fate and perhaps that the Angel of Death is solely a bureaucrat, who only takes people who are on the daily list. Historically, Jews did not have family names. They were called as "son of..." "daughter of..." and this is still the practice in ritual contexts. Usually, a person is called as descendant of the father; but when making prayer for the sick, or the name change, the person will be called by his mother's name, as if to call

forth, the feminine and merciful side of God. Linguistically, the Hebrew word for compassion is the plural of the Hebrew word for womb.

In Israel, having children is seen as a supreme value. The State supports hi tech fertility treatments longer and at a higher age than any other country. It also has the highest rate of prenatal testing. Sadly, there is very little awareness of replacement child syndrome. Let me tell you a telling case. A young woman, adopted because of neglect and abuse by her biological 'womb' mother, had a child who developed an aggressive cancer. The woman herself had a psychiatric history especially during previous pregnancies. During the hospitalization, she would disappear for days, only to suddenly appear in a distraught state. Ultimately, the child despite all medical efforts, and they were considerable, died. Immediately following, the mother said, "I will have another child. It's too risky for me to get pregnant but I will find a surrogate mother." She then proceeded to crowd source to fund the surrogacy in another country and almost immediately was successful in raising large amount of money required for the project. Almost no one questioned the sensibility of the plan and her uncompleted grief, actually hardly begun, even. Now she has this new baby whose fate was decided when her sister died long before she was conceived.

### **Making matches**

Memory and memorialization is almost always seen as something positive in Judaism, even when it is part of replacement phenomena. But there are also transcendent, even romantic moments of memory. I will conclude with a story from the Talmud. Since Abraham, it is a Jewish tradition to argue with God. One Rabbi operating in that tradition turned toward God and said: "Ok, you worked hard for 6 days. But what have you been doing since?"

God replied, "I have been doing something much more difficult than creating a world. I have been finding and making matches. After I create a soul, I place it in its mother's womb just at conception. And then a voice goes out: Miriam for Benjamin; Benjamin for Miriam. In that way, when you meet your intended one, you feel at home with each other because you already know each other from before you were born."

This story reveals the view that everyone has their 'intended' who is their beloved soul mate. But in terms of replacement phenomena, I think this story also reflects the fantasy, impossible in life, but easily accessible via active imagination of meeting the child you have replaced. Then surely, brothers and sisters can sit together in peace, and not in mourning.