

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

by Paysach J. Krohn

I had already performed the bris on the eight-day-old infant; the prayers entering the child into the Covenant of Abraham had been recited and now the long-anticipated moment had arrived -- the name of the new infant was about to be announced. The assembled guests eagerly anticipated the exciting news. Traditionally, a baby boy's Hebrew name is not revealed to anyone before the bris other than those involved in choosing it. And likewise, a baby girl's Hebrew name is not revealed until she is named in synagogue during the reading of the Torah. Would the baby boy at this particular bris be named for a late uncle? For a beloved cousin who recently passed away? Or perhaps for a distinguished rabbi? Maybe he would be given a name his parents chose merely because they liked it.

Naming a child is one of the most important decisions new parents make. The Talmud (Berachos 7b) teaches that a Hebrew name has an influence on its bearer. Hence, it is extremely important to name your children after individuals with positive character traits who have led fortunate lives and have helped bring goodness to the world.

The legendary Kabbalist, the Arizal, writes that the nature and behavior of a person, whether good or bad, can be discovered by analyzing his or her name. A child named Yehudah could possibly be destined for leadership, for Yehudah, the fourth son of Jacob, symbolized monarchy and indeed, most Jewish kings descended from the tribe of Yehudah. It is said that parents are actually blessed with prophesy when naming their newborn babies so that they will choose names which aptly describe their children's personas and their destinies in life.

According to the Arizal, even the numerical value of the Hebrew letters in one's name can be indicative of an individual's character. For example, the numerical value, or gematria, of the name Elisheva is equivalent to the numerical value of the Hebrew words "yemei simcha", meaning days of happiness, perhaps portending a joyous life for a baby girl named Elisheva.

It is precisely because the fortunes and misfortunes of mankind are concealed in the secrets of the letters, vowels and meanings of Hebrew names that a seriously ill person is given an additional name like Chaim, meaning life, or Rafael, meaning G-d heals, in order to influence his destiny. We hope and pray that the new name will herald a new mazel, or fortune, for the stricken individual.

One of the founders of Chassidism in Galicia, Poland, Rabbi Elimelech of Lyzhansk, writes in his classic work on Torah, Noam Elimelech, (Bamidbar), that there is a profound connection between the soul of an infant and the soul of the person for whom he or she is named. When a child is named after the deceased, the latter's soul is elevated to a higher realm in Heaven and a spiritual affinity is created between the soul of the departed and the soul of the newborn child. That deep spiritual bond between these two souls can have a profound impact on the child.

The Hebrew word for soul -- neshama -- is spelled with the four Hebrew letters nun, shin, mem and hei. Remarkably, the Hebrew word for name, shem -- spelled shin, mem -- is contained within the word neshama, indicating yet again the strong connection between one's name and one's soul, or essence.

Back at the bris, the young father was now huddled next to his own father -- the baby's grandfather -- who was being honored with the recitation of the naming prayer. Holding a goblet filled with wine, the grandfather intoned, "Our G-d and G-d of our forefathers, preserve this child for his father and mother, and may his name be called in Israel." The grandfather waited for his son to whisper the name in his ear so that he could proudly announce it.

"Yoel" whispered the father. The grandfather gasped as tears suddenly welled

in his eyes. His voice choked as his lips quivered with emotion. His new grandson was being named for his own father -- the baby's great grandfather. Tears also welled in the eyes of all the guests who remembered Yoel Pfeiffer.

In the late 1930s, he was forced to escape from Germany the night after he got married. He made it to England but upon arrival there he was imprisoned as a suspected spy. He remained on British soil throughout the war until he was able at last to immigrate to Canada where he was reunited with his wife.

The late Yoel Pfeiffer began his life anew in Montreal. With almost nothing but perseverance, he built a family, a business and a legacy of charitable deeds. At the festive meal following the bris, the young father recalled the fondness he had for his grandfather and explained how he and his wife wished to honor him and how they hoped to confer his strength of character to their new son, Yoel Pfeiffer.

As a Mohel, one trained to perform Jewish ritual circumcision, I am often involved in helping families choose appropriate Hebrew names for their children. My advice is based on three principles: a) Use the exact Hebrew name of the person you wish to honor or choose a name that at least contains several of the same letters in this individual's Hebrew name; b) be sure your child's name contains only positive connotations, and c) select a name your child will be proud of. Remember, your child's name is his eternal identity.

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