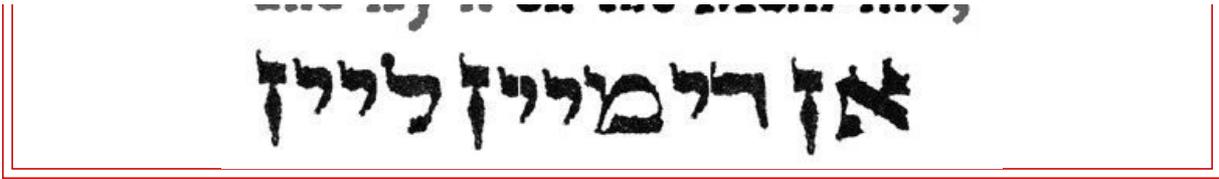


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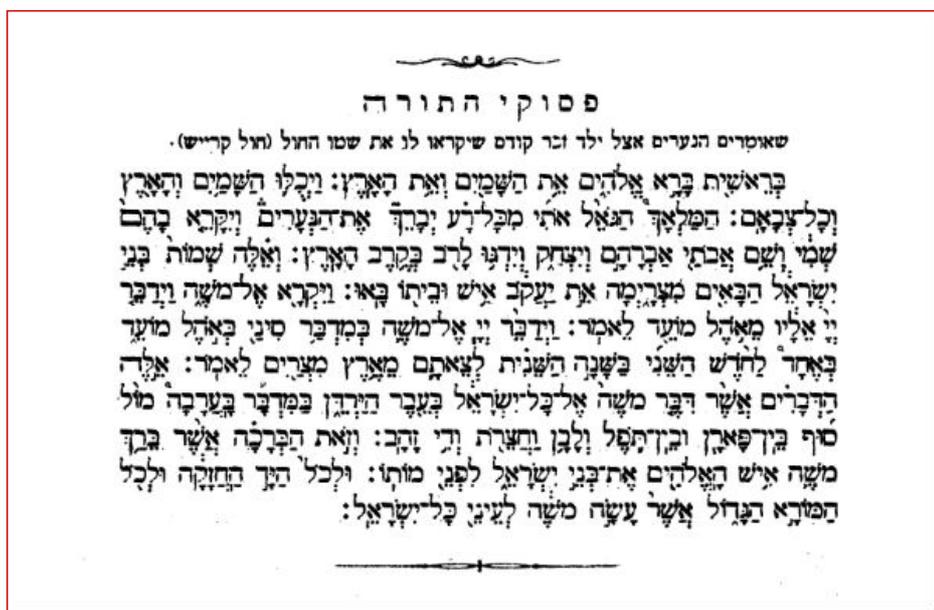
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2012

## Are Yiddishe names Yiddish?

Somehow the subject of Yiddish names came up recently. Although I expect many readers to know all about this, it also seems that many do not realize quite the way they used to be perceived. Today it is not uncommon for a boy to receive a name like Zalman at his bris, but in the past this was almost never what happened. A boy who would be called Zalman, or even Shlomo Zalman, was invariably given the name Shlomo. This became known as his *shem kodesh* the *holy* - Hebrew - name, and when he grew up it was the name he'd be called to the Torah with. Some time after the *bris* there might be a small ceremony where he'd be given the name Zalman, which is what he would actually be called. This name was the *shem chol*, the *secular* or perhaps better, *daily* - name.

This was an old Ashkenazic custom going back to early medieval times; certainly in some places there may not have been a ceremony, but they just started calling the baby by the Yiddish, or German, or Judeo-German equivalent of the Hebrew name. It was known as "*chol kreisch*," which I guess means something like "calling of the secular [name]," although it must be pointed out that it is spelled "Hollekreisch" in Latin letters, and some pesky scholars conjecture that it refers to a female demon called Holle or Hulda who was active in bothering babies in German speaking lands many centuries ago. See M. Guedemann *בימי הביניים המערב בארצות והחיים ספר התורה* vol. II (Warsaw 1898) p.85 (link). It must be noted though that as early as the 15th century the term was explained by a rabbi as referring to *chol* in the sense of secular - see Maharam Minz (#19). While this cannot fully refute the previously mentioned conjecture, surely it is notable that this was asserted in the still demon-haunted middle ages. Besides, the Jews had their own baby demon, Lilith. Actually I think that fact can be used to support either conjecture.

The ceremony continued into recent times, and perhaps still continues (as opposed to being resurrected by Neo-Ashkenazim, as undoubtedly it also has). Here for example is the "liturgy" to be recited at such a ceremony as printed in Seligmann Baer's *Seder Avodat Yisrael* (Roedelheim 1868):



As an example of the two-name phenomenon, although I do not claim that these represents cases of a ceremony, many medieval Ashkenazic rabbis were called Leon, and are referred to as "Rabbi Leon" in the literature. Some are sometimes called Rabbi Yehuda or Aryeh and the like, so we plainly see that at least some of them had both names. In all likelihood the Hebrew name was what they were named at the

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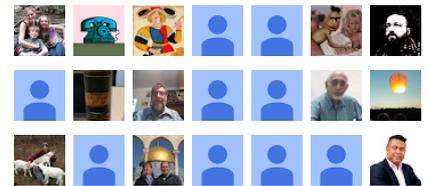
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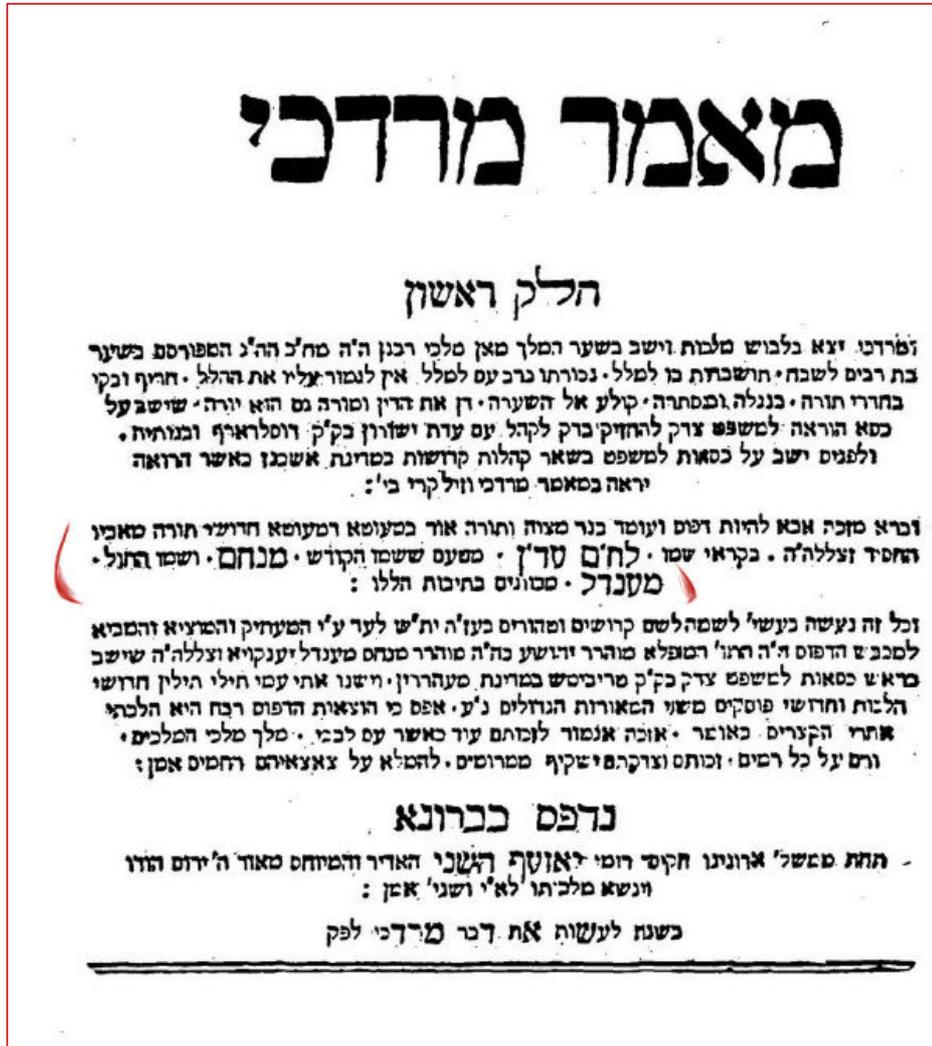
Little Leonard Cohen in Hebrew.

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names. Naturally, however, an entire literature developed around the proper spelling - and pronunciation - of these names, since when writing *gittin* - divorce documents - *halacha* requires precision even in spelling. See for starters *Beit Yosef Even Haezer* 129, where the spelling of names, including Leon, is discussed (this is only the tip of the iceberg for this literature).

As an illustration of this, here is the title page of a book from 1789:



This collection of R. Mordechai Halberstadt's responsa was published posthumously by his grandson, who included some of his father's own original Torah insights as well, under the title *Lechem Eden*. The title page informs us that the name of these are derived from a word play on his father's name: "ששמו" ששמו" "For his holy name, Menachem, and his secular name, Mendel, are intended by these words."

POSTED BY MISSISSIPPI FRED MACDOWELL AT 1:27 PM 39 COMMENTS [👉](#)

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### Anonymous

11 years ago

.would be immediate cousins מאניש, מאנדל and מענכין

Aside from animal names, can you work out the formula for determining one's Judeo-German name? Could we reengineer it for a handy list of English-but-Jewish(ish) names to match currently popular Hebrew ones

Also, don't you get the sense that with women they went straight for a secular name? In the Chabad community, for instance, it seems like 50% of the female population has Russian/Yiddish names, often exclusively

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### S.

11 years ago

In 5 minutes, no. But with the aid of books we can probably pair off most Hebrew names that were used with choices for equivalents. We could probably transpose many, if not all, into English.

As for women, they did indeed go straight for the non-Hebrew name. Seems like for most of the past 1000 years Jewish women, whether Ashkenazim or Sefardim or Edot Hamizrah, did not have, as a rule, strictly Hebrew names - or at least in practice never had an opportunity for using them, so I'm not sure what the difference is. No one needs to give all the exceptions, I'm aware of them. I should mention that in the Maharam Minz teshuva he discussed whether Rekhlein (spelled with a khaf) and Rahel (the Hebrew name) are the same.

In general there are different naming conventions with women and men (that goes across all cultures) so I'm not sure if it's too significant if many Shaynas and Tobas have brothers called mainly Aryeh and Moshe.

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### Yehoshua

11 years ago

Very informative, thanks!

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### Ephrayim

11 years ago

Surely you know about the 'neo-ashknazi' Hamburger in his book שרשי מנהג אשכנז מא"ח has an exposition about the Chol Krisch.

"Seems like for most of the past 1000 years Jewish women, whether Ashkenazim or Sefardim or Edot Hamizrah, did not have, as a rule, strictly Hebrew names"

Actually it's much older than that see the four volumes of Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity from Tal Ilan.

On Ohev Ger Pt. I.

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דבר אחר

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