

**Looking into Israeli Prevalent Girls' Names:  
Revealing Ideologies According to Foucauldian Discourse Analysis**

**Investigação dos nomes predominantes das meninas israelenses:  
revelando ideologias Segundo a análise do discurso foucaultiana**

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**Abstract:** Israeli girls' names that remained prevalent over lengthy periods were examined with the aim of determining their representation in social discourses as defined by Foucault (2002). Rare names occurring three to ten times per year from 1948 to 2015 were examined as well. Foucault defined four dichotomous axes that distinguish social discourses, with each axis characterized by social normativity at one end and original creativity at the other. The four dichotomous axes of discourse according to Foucault are 'discursive event opposed to creation', 'discursive series opposed to unity', 'discursive regularity opposed to originality' and, 'condition of possibility opposed to signification'. The most prevalent girls' names were considered as representation of the social normativity, while the rare names were considered as representations of social discourse contains original creativity. 19 prevalent names were found, 12 of which stayed on the most-popular-names list for 68 years, and seven of which appeared on the list for at least 40 years. Fifteen of these 19 names are the names of female figures from the Old Testament. Eight of the names are those of the most important women in the Bible – women who also have enjoyed the greatest degree of favor in Jewish tradition. Four other names are those of assertive women whose actions were viewed unfavorably in Jewish tradition. An analysis of these names in Foucauldian terms indicated that the most-popular-names list for girls constitutes part of three simultaneous social discourses in Israeli society across its component subgroups. These three discourses are: traditional Jewish discourse, Zionist discourse, and Israeli discourse. The latter discourse has not only featured names that appeared for many years on the popular-names list; it has also featured, in more than half the cases, names belonging to the rare-names lists – a phenomenon consistent with creativity, in Foucauldian terms.

**Keywords:** Foucauldian discourse analysis, stable names, popular-girls'-names list, social normativity, rare-girls'-names list

**Resumo:** Os nomes das meninas israelenses que permaneceram predominantes por longos períodos foram examinados com o objetivo de determinar sua representação nos discursos sociais, conforme definido por Foucault (2002). Nomes raros, que ocorreram de três a dez vezes por ano de 1948 a 2015, também foram analisados. Foucault definiu quatro eixos dicotômicos que distinguem os discursos sociais, sendo cada eixo caracterizado pela normatividade social em uma extremidade e criatividade original na outra. Os quatro eixos dicotômicos do discurso, segundo Foucault, são 'evento

discursivo oposto à criação', 'série discursiva oposta à unidade', 'regularidade discursiva oposta à originalidade' e 'condição de possibilidade oposta à significação'. Os nomes das meninas mais prevalentes foram considerados como representação da normatividade social, enquanto os nomes raros foram considerados como representações do discurso social contendo criatividade original. Foram encontrados 19 nomes prevalentes, dos quais 12 permaneceram na lista de nomes mais populares por 68 anos, e sete dos quais apareceram na lista por pelo menos 40 anos. Quinze desses 19 nomes são nomes de figuras femininas do Antigo Testamento. Oito dos nomes são os das mulheres mais importantes da Bíblia – mulheres que também desfrutaram do maior grau de favor na tradição judaica. Outros quatro nomes são de mulheres assertivas cujas ações eram vistas de forma desfavorável na tradição judaica. Uma análise desses nomes em termos foucaultianos indicou que a lista de nomes mais populares para meninas constitui parte de três discursos sociais simultâneos na sociedade israelense em seus subgrupos componentes. Esses três discursos são: o discurso judaico tradicional, o discurso sionista e o discurso israelense. Este último discurso não só apresentou nomes que apareceram por muitos anos na lista de nomes populares; também apresentou, em mais da metade dos casos, nomes pertencentes às listas de nomes raros – um fenômeno consistente com a criatividade, em termos foucaultianos.

**Palavras-chave:** Análise do discurso foucaultiana, nomes estáveis, lista de nomes populares de meninas, normatividade social, lista de nomes raros de meninas.

## 1. Theoretical introduction

### 1.1 Onomastics as a tool for understanding social discourse

The philosophical definition of given names relates to their function, to the intuitive way in which we understand them as symbols denoting objects, and to the fact that anyone with mastery of the language from which they derive recognizes them (Frege, 1892). Within the language system, given names are a sub-class within the class of nouns (Jespersen, 1924). However, a given name is a word that deviates from the language (Derrida, 1990), and from which, therefore, supra-linguistic insights may be derived, as we shall see in the present article.

Derrida (1997) argued that a given name socially upholds a pragmatic context that extends across the timeline and links the individual's sense of self-identity with a model of social behavior. A given name is indeed characterized by its social uses for individual

purposes. This independent existence reflects outlooks held by all the individuals in a society, and not only of elites that set the public tone (Wolffsohn & Brechenmacher, 2001). Given names accumulate deep meanings in Jewish culture. These meanings range from the parents' connections with God through the respect parents demonstrate towards their elders, by choosing 'suitable given names' and finally, to parents' references to events or historical personalities (Landman, 2014).

This mindset towards the act of naming as well as to the names themselves can be seen in the Jewish Onomasticon throughout history. Based on this attitude, this article seeks to study the historical and linguistic characteristics of each prevalent name by its' classification to one of the four name groups which combine the Israeli onomasticon. Linguistic research investigates names' semantic aspects, morphological/syntactical patterns, and their prominent sounds. By analyzing the most prevalent girls' names, an attempt is made to understand their representations in accordance with each of the four discursive axes as defined by Foucault (2002).

Lieberson's (2000) view was that the statistical distribution of given names in a specific society represents the decades-long evidence of fashion trends subject to change over time. However, when we look at the distribution of fashionable names in Israel, we find that trends change very rapidly compared with the United States. Most of the Israeli given names gain popularity just as quickly as they lose it over a course of a few years, some remain prevalent over 20 years, and others complete the popularity cycle within 10 year or less (Landman, 2016). The distribution of given names in the Jewish sector in Israel may be similar to the way many discourses distribute in a society according to Foucault (2002). A discourse is a spoken or written text that "explodes" at a specific point and then recurs and is widely known until it changes, is forgotten, and erased (Foucault, 2002), much like the distribution of given names in Israel. Hence, it

is interesting to analyze the most popular girls' given names in the state of Israel in accordance with Foucault's definition of the four axes of social discourse.

Foucault (2002) distinguished four dichotomous axes of discourse, with period-specific normativity at one end of each axis, and deviation from the norm at the other – what Foucault calls “creation.” The first axis is that of the “discursive event opposed to creation” – the event is an occurrence of discourses in a society in accordance with a specific outlook that is prevalent in that society. At the other end of the axis is creation – the discourse that is new and thus socially conspicuous. This kind of creative conspicuousness, according to Foucault (2002), was evident in the early experiment-and-observation-based scientific research as practiced by Gregor Mendel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The second axis is that of the “discursive series opposed to unity” – when discursive events of a specific kind are widespread, they are grouped into discursive series that represent normative thinking in a society. This is how one relates today to publications on topics in biology, medicine, and genetics that reflect similar approaches to research and the drawing of conclusions. The other end of the axis, unity, refers to the unity of creation that appeared in the previous axis, which manifests in a low number of texts and therefore determines their prominence after the fact (Foucault, 2002).

The third axis is that of “discursive regularity opposed to originality” – “regularity” refers to the frequent appearances of the discursive events. Originality is also related to the “creation” of the first axis, and refers to originality that encompasses creation, which is indeed found after the fact to be true creation. As made evident by worldwide scientists' acceptance of ‘proper scientific steps’ in researching biological topics as performed by Gregor Mendel's method of gaining conclusions based on observations and measurements (Foucault, 2002).

The final axis is that of “condition of possibility opposed to signification” – the condition of possibility is connected to a general signification of the discourse, in accordance with social norms, as opposed to the unique signification held within the creation. The uniqueness of the creation charges it with signification due to its distinctiveness among the normative discourses underway within society, as was Mendel’s method in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Foucault, 2002).

Based on the assumption that prominent texts represent normative thinking in a given society, the most popular girls’ names in Israel’s Jewish population during the state’s first 68 years of existence were examined. The assumption was that the most popular names over time reflect normative discourse or discourses in Israeli society, and that they therefore deviate from onomastic fashions that drive given names higher and lower on the onomastic prevalence scale. Girls’ names were chosen because prior research found that these names are more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of fashion than boys’ names (Landman, 2016).

## **1.2 Biblical onomastics**

The Bible (the Old Testament) constitutes the largest and most important body of data on given names in contemporary Israeli society. The Bible’s influence is also evident in the morphological/syntactical and semantic character of new names that are constantly being invented by native Hebrew speakers based on patterns identical to those of the Bible (Landman, 2016). Most modern and ancient given names were lexemes taken from the general Hebrew lexicon. They were derived from roots that were inserted into nominal or verbal templates, and thus have grammatical qualities generally characteristic of Hebrew linguistic forms (Rosenhouse, 2013).

The Old Testament period lasted nearly a thousand years, from the second millennium BCE until after the middle of the first millennium BCE. During this time, the Jewish people grew from an extended family divided into tribes into a single people that lived in the Holy Land and spoke Hebrew for a large portion of this period. The Jewish people's emergence produced a unique onomastic lexicon that has been studied by many scholars, including Gray (1896), Noth (1928), Porten (1980), Zadok (1988), Fowler (1988), Layton (1990), and many others.

The given names that recur in the Bible are few; each name is unique, almost a one-time occurrence. The prevailing view in the region was that proper names are a magical linguistic element capable of influencing the course of people's lives. One example of this is the change of the names **Avram** and **Sarai** by God to **Avraham** and **Sarah**, in response to their changing fates. This ancient view was formerly held throughout the Fertile Crescent, known as the Amorite space (Noth, 1928). The magical charge of the given name is especially evident in the theophoric names (those containing at least one element of the name of a god). The deity whose name features in a given name is regarded by parents as responsible for the life of the newborn bearing that name (Ilan, 1984).

Because names embodied magical power, they were tailored to newborns, generally by their mothers, to fit the specific circumstances of their births (Arazi, 1982). More than 2000 masculine names are found in the Old Testament, but only a little over a hundred names of women (Rosen, 1982). Linguistically, there is no difference between women's and men's names in the Old Testament (Zadok, 1988). Indeed, 11 names are common to women and men, including **Aviya** (Abijah), **Chushim**, **Eiphah**, and **Shlomit** (Shelomith).

Semantically and morphologically/syntactically, Old Testament names can be divided into three categories. The quantitatively largest group is that of the theophoric names, those that include at least one element of a name of God. The names consist of two or more components, some of which constitute nominal combinations – **Shmuel** (Samuel) (*shem* + *el*, name + God), with others forming sentences – **Yehonatan** (*yeho* + *natan*, God + gave). Early in the Bible, the names of God used by the Israelite tribes are similar to those of the gods of other peoples of the region – **Av**, **Ach**, **El**, **Am**, **Tzur**, **Shadai**, and the like. Starting with the period of settlement of Eretz Israel, the Israelite tribes used two main theophoric name elements – **yah/yeho/yo** and **el** (Porten, 1982).

The second group of biblical names is that of shortened theophoric names in which the theophoric element is omitted, leaving only a single component – a verb or noun or, in rare cases, an adjective. Essentially, any name that consists of only a single component may be suspected of falling into this category, as the meaning of the remaining component indicates that the name was originally theophoric, as in the names **Oved** (“he worships”), **Ya’ir** (“He enlightens”), and **Ner** (“candle”). After all, who is an object of worship? Who will enlighten? To whom does the candle belong? The answer in each instance is “God” (Porten, 1982).

The numerically smallest category contains a single component that is usually a noun. Because the meaning of that component is obviously secular, one may assume that the name was originally not theophoric. A large proportion of these names are animal names, such as **Becher** (young male camel), **Chulda** (rat), and **Nachash** (snake) (Breier, 2009); names from the plant world, such as **Oren** (pine tree), **Alon** (oak tree), **Hadassah** (myrtle tree), and **Tamar** (date palm); names of jewelry items and precious stones, such as **Chel’ah** (link in a chain); and abstract nouns – **Dinah** (judgment) and

**Chanah** (grace or favor). These names were derived from a variety of Hebrew noun patterns (Zadok, 1988).

### 1.3 Onomastic developments over the course of Jewish history

The Israeli onomasticon currently comprises four groups of names, each of which has had a distinct historical trajectory. The first group is that of the “traditional names.” These are names of major biblical figures central to Jewish mythology, most of which gained prevalence in all Jewish communities around the world from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE on (Klein, 1929; 1930).

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Alexander of Macedon entered Jerusalem with his army. The impact of Hellenization led to a change in Jewish attitudes regarding the magical aspect of given names. No longer did the Jews try to tailor a unique name to the newborn. Rather, naming became papponymic – children were called by the names of family matriarchs and patriarchs. Later, when most of the Jewish people had been exiled from the Holy Land and were fighting to preserve their authentic religious character, the magical Jewish outlook became widespread: the name became a means of passing on to the newborn a “spark” from the familial patriarchal and matriarchal figures, reaching back toward the original biblical figure at the start of the papponymic chain of transmission. Per this belief, infants called Yitzhak and Rivka after their grandfather and grandmother bear a spark that originated with the biblical **Yitzhak** and **Rivkah** (Hacohen, 1991). These names were usually the names of major Old Testament figures: matriarchs – **Le’ah** and **Rachel**; patriarchs – **Ya’akov** and **Yisra’el**; prophets and high priests – **Moshe**, **Miriam**, and **Aharon**; judges – **Yehoshu’a** and **Devorah**; kings and queens – **Shlomo**, **David**, and **Esther** (Klar, 1950).



The main onomastic creation in the diaspora era consisted of talisman names. Talisman names were invented in an attempt to defend the newborn and to express parental wishes for a boy's future – life, security, and good fortune, as well as national aspirations. For the girls, parents would express the same sentiments with an emphasis on fertility and beauty. The first male talisman names are in the Talmud<sup>1</sup>. Approximately 100 talisman names of Hebrew and non-Hebrew origin characterize different Jewish communities. Sephardi communities (Jews originating from Spain and Portugal) created names such as **Shem-Tov** (Hebrew - good name) and **Nechamah** (Hebrew – consolation) for boys, and **Simchah** (Hebrew - joy) and **Gentillah** (gentle in Judezmo – Jewish Spanish) for girls (Schwarzwald [Rodrgue], 2010). Ashkenazi communities (Jews originating from central and eastern Europe) had talismanic creations such as **Simchah** (joy), **Bunim** (from bon homme, meaning good man in French) and **Ben-Zion** (son of Zion in Hebrew) for boys along with **Nechamah** (consolation) and **Yentel** (Gentilla in Yidish, a Jewish language spoken in east Europe) for girls (Gompertz, 1957). Talisman names in the Middle East, Iran and Caucasus included **Mashiach** (Masaya - Hebrew), **Zion** (the Biblical name of Judea - Hebrew) and **Walad** (child in Arabic) for boys, and **Ruchamah** (pitied in Hebrew) and **Chamamah** (dove in Arabic) for girls (Gaimani, 1997; Tolmas, 2003; Enoch, 2011).

The rise of political Zionism led to the development of the second onomastic group – the “renewed” names. Religious Zionism in the sense of yearning for Jewish autonomy in Eretz Israel had existed from the time the Jews were exiled from the Holy

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<sup>1</sup> Talmud – the books known as the Talmud are one of the cornerstones of Judaism. Its divisions provide the background for every subject of Halacha (Jewish law that often ventures onto a wide range of subjects and expounds broadly on the Jewish Bible). The Talmud was redacted by many Jewish scholars for a timespan of around 300 years. The process of writing the Talmud proceeded in what were then the two major centers of Jewish scholarship, Jerusalem and Babylon. The question as to when the Talmud was finally put into its present form is not settled among modern scholars. Some scholars believe the Talmud Bavli (from Babylon) consists of documents compiled over the period of Late Antiquity (3rd to 5th centuries).

Land by the Romans and, later, by the Byzantines. In order to maintain the religious Zionist way of life, the Jews tried throughout their years of exile to return and settle in the Land. There were periods when Jewish settlement flourished there, but those efforts were always nipped in the bud by hostile invaders such as the Crusaders of a thousand years ago (Sebag Montefiore, 2007).

Political Zionism placed the life of the Jewish people at the center, rather than the Religious Zionism. It was awakened by the racist antisemitism (a phenomenon that could not be forestalled by religious conversion) that began to spread across Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Dreyfus Affair symbolized the advancement of this kind of antisemitism into Western Europe. The waves of pogroms that erupted from 1881 in southern Russia reflected the spread of antisemitism in Eastern Europe. The systematic slaughter of Jews in World War II in the face of global political indifference persuaded many that political Zionism was the only viable solution (Shapira, 2012).

The 1881 pogroms in Russia launched waves of immigration by Zionist Jews to the Holy Land, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire. In Eretz Israel there were religious Jewish communities that had been present for many generations, waiting for God to fulfill the words of the Old Testament prophets. The clash between the recent Jewish immigrants who saw themselves as “new Jews” and the religious Jewish communities known collectively as the Old Yishuv was evident in all areas of life, including onomastics.

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century on, some children born to Zionist families continued to receive traditional names in accordance with papyponymic practice. Others were given “renewed” names from the Bible, names that had been disqualified for use during the exilic period because Jewish tradition had suppressed the memory of the biblical figures who bore those names, such as **Avshalom**, **Amnon**, and **Tamar** (problematic children

of King David), or **Yehonatan** and **Michal** (recalling King David's sins against them). Additionally, there was a revival of names of biblical figures so marginal that these names (e.g., **Avital**, **Hadar**, and **Eran**) had not been considered for use during the exilic period (Weitman, 1988).

One meaningful step made by the Zionists on the road to national liberation was the transformation of Hebrew, the language of the Bible, into a spoken language, rather than a vehicle for study and prayer as was the case in the Old Yishuv. The revival of spoken Hebrew made it possible to expand the Hebrew onomasticon (Landman, 2016). The third onomastic group is that of the “new names” created from spoken Hebrew. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century on, native Hebrew-speaking parents invented given names, especially for girls, for whom the biblical onomasticon is limited, and who, during the exilic period, had generally been given names borrowed from the surrounding cultures. These names were morphologically/syntactically and semantically similar to the Hebrew names of the Old Testament. Thus were invented new theophoric names such as **Eliran** and **Li'el**, abbreviated theophoric names such as **Ro'ee**, and many secular names – compound names such as **Meital** (*mei + tal*, water + dew, i.e., dewdrop) and **Lior** (*li + or*, to me + light), and single-component names – **Drorah** (liberty) and **Yaniv** (he will bear fruit) (Rosenhouse, 2013).

Modern-day friction with different cultures gave rise to the fourth group, “foreign names”, which have no meaning in Hebrew, as in biblical times one finds onomastic traces of cultural friction, with the Egyptians in such names as **Osnat** and **Moshe**. In modern Israel the most obvious onomastic influence is that of American culture, with somewhat lesser French, Russian, and Ethiopian influences. The public visibility of these names pertains mainly to girls, rather than boys, in such names as **Emma**, **Emily**, **Liam** (an androgynous name), and **Lynn** (Landman, 2015). One interesting

development in social media outlets devoted to baby names is that of parents seeking theophoric meanings for foreign names by breaking them down into acronyms that represent God's presence in the name. For instance, a request for a theophoric meaning for the name **Hilie** elicited the suggestion of “**H**ashem” (God) will safeguard my girl for me (**li**) (post from January 31, 2024, in the Hebrew Facebook group Choosing a Baby Names and Everything of Interest to Expectant Mothers).

From a quantitative perspective, biblical names are outstandingly popular among the Jewish Israeli public, not only in terms of the large number of names taken from the Bible, but also in terms of the large number of children called by those names. Religious communities mainly use traditional names. Secular communities use names from all four groups (Landman, 2020). This article's research question pertained small groups of girls' names that were prevalent for over 65 years, in order to understand the discourses behind those stable names by each of the four discursive axes as defined by Foucault (2002).

## **2. Data**

This study looked at names given to newborn girls in Israel's Jewish sector between 1948, the year the state was established, until 2015 (inclusive), per the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics. The data included the following:

- A. The patterns of the 50 most popular girls' names for each year during this period.
- B. Tens of thousands of given names of rare names from 1948 to 2015, with a numerical prevalence of three to ten name appearances per year.

A total of 19 stable names were found, including 15 names from the Old Testament. The breakdown can be seen in the following table. These names were analyzed in terms of their classification within one of the four groups mentioned in the

previous section, and their linguistic properties – semantic, morphological/syntactical, and phonological. The aim was to try to identify the reasons behind these names’ great popularity.

### Stable names by group and period

	Traditional names	Renewed names	New names	Foreign names
Biblical, prevalent since 1948	<b>Sarah</b> <b>Rivkah</b> <b>Le’ah</b> <b>Rachel</b> <b>Miriam</b> <b>Chanah</b> <b>Esther</b>	<b>Tamar</b> <b>Ya’el</b> <b>Ruth</b> <b>Michal</b>		
Talisman name, prevalent since 1948	<b>Chayah</b>			
Biblical, prevalent since the 1970s		<b>Na’amah</b> <b>Ephrat</b> <b>No’ah</b> <b>Hadas</b>		
Taken from Israeli texts, prevalent since the 1970s			<b>Shirah</b>	<b>Mayah</b>
Talisman name, prevalent since the 1970s			<b>Adi</b>	

#### 2.1. The stable traditional names

Eight stable traditional names were found that were exceedingly popular for girls from the years of exile (Klar, 1950). Seven of the names are from the Bible, and they belong to the preeminent female figures in Jewish mythology: the matriarchs – **Sarah**, **Rivkah**, **Le’ah**, and **Rachel**, along with **Chanah**, the mother of the prophet Shmuel; a prophetess – **Miriam**; and a queen – **Esther**. These names were transmitted papponymically from grandmother to granddaughter from at least the 8<sup>th</sup> century on.<sup>2</sup> These female figures were not only central to Jewish mythology; they were also characterized by great assertiveness in a world that was blatantly patriarchal. The

<sup>2</sup> The names Chanah, Miriam, Rachel and Sarah were popular among the Jews before their exile from Eretz Israel (Ilan, 1984).

stability of these names stems from their association with the most important female figures in Jewish mythology (Klar, 1950).

The additional name, **Chayah**, is a protective or talisman name meant to ensure that the child lives. In contrast to most talisman names, which were local and used by specific Jewish communities, the name Chayah was popular in most Jewish communities around the world (Gompertz, 1957). In this case, the name's semantic content – wishing life for the newborn – led to its outstanding popularity.

In terms of semantics, it is hard to find a common denominator between all of the traditional names. Miriam and Esther are foreign names whose meaning is not apparent to native Hebrew speakers. The names Rivkah and Le'ah denote animals from the “cattle” category, but this meaning is not apparent to Hebrew speakers, as the relevant lexemes are not used in spoken Hebrew today. The name Chanah is derived from the word “chen” (grace, favor), and its meaning is likewise not apparent to contemporary Hebrew speakers (Landman, 2020).

The more “transparent” names for Hebrew speakers are Rachel, a literary name for “ewe,” and Sarah, the feminine form of the word “sar” (chief or ruler). The name Chayah (life) is the most transparent in meaning for native speakers, but is not associated with any historical figure.

The six Hebrew names are nouns in different patterns, the most prominent of them being the “ka-ta” pattern of Sarah and Chayah. Similar to them is the name Chanah, which was once pronounced differently, although today all three names are pronounced similarly. This morphological similarity is related to their phonological similarity – all of the names have two syllables and five of them end in the *kamatz-heh* (אָה “ah”) suffix. The most prominent sound is the “r” sound, which appears in five of

the names in this group. However, in the absence of any additional phonological similarity, this shared “r” seems to be merely coincidental.

The conclusion arrived at from an analysis of these eight names is that the seven biblical names owe their status to their historical Old Testament background, while the talisman name owes its standing to its semantic content. Because these names were the most common women’s names during the exilic period (Klar, 1950), it appears that they represent the texts of the traditional Jewish discourse. In this discourse, they constitute an event that appears as an integral part of traditional discursive series that flourish in religious and ultra-orthodox communities in Israel. The prevalent use of these names constitutes a norm, and they therefore appear with high regularity thanks to the overt social signification of a traditional outlook represented by compliance with the papponymic custom of naming newborn girls for familial matriarchs.

## **2.2. The renewed stable names**

The renewed names can be divided into two groups – those that have remained on the 50-most-popular-per year-girls’-names list since 1948, and those that made it onto the list in the early 1970s.

### **2.2.1. The renewed stable names since 1948**

Four renewed names that have been stable since 1948 appear on the popular names list: **Tamar**, **Ya’el**, **Michal**, and **Ruth**. All of these names are taken from biblical figures that are well-known, although Jewish tradition tended not to glorify them. Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Yehuda (Judah), found a creative way to bear the latter’s children after being expelled from his home following the deaths of her first two husbands, who were his sons. Ya’el was a Midianite woman who killed the commander of the Philistine army, Sisera, when the latter sought refuge in her tent while fleeing the

Israelites. Michal was a princess, the daughter of the first Jewish king, Saul, and the first wife of David, whose life she saved when her father sent soldiers to kill him. When David became king, he insisted that she live as his wife but did not engage in marital relations with her, and she remained childless. Her situation did not prevent her from being openly critical of David. The traditional commentators viewed David's treatment of Michal as altogether sinful. Ruth was the Moabite daughter-in-law of Naomi and the great grandmother of king David; to avoid starvation, she openly flirted with Boaz and asked him to marry her<sup>3</sup>

Semantically, there is no similarity between the names. The meaning of Michal is not transparent to Hebrew speakers, and that of Ruth is unclear. The name Ya'el is that of an animal, while Tamar is the name of a fruit. The names Ya'el, Michal, and Tamar are nouns in various forms, with no similarity between them. The phonological attribute that stands out among this group compared with the stable traditional-names group is the closed final syllable, as opposed to the open-syllable endings that we saw above. Another similarity is that three of the names have two syllables, consistent with the fact that two-syllable names constitute the largest group in the Israeli onomasticon (Landman, 2016). There is a similarity between the "l" sound that ends Michal and Ya'el, while the names Ruth and Tamar both contain the "r" and "t" sounds, but here as well it is hard to view this similarity as the reason for these names' great popularity in Israel.

The popularity of these names appears to stem from the female biblical figures who bore them – assertive women who did not submit to masculine authority (in the cases of Tamar, Michal, and Ruth) or who were more successful than the men around them,

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<sup>3</sup> The names Tamar, Michal, and Ruth appear very infrequently in epigraphic findings from Eretz Israel up to 1600 years ago (Ilan, 1984). The name Ruth was given to girls throughout the exilic period, but very infrequently.



as with Ya'el who overcame Sisera. These names represent the Zionist discourse as a frequent event belonging to series of discursive events embodied in an orderly worldview, and they are therefore given to girls with exceedingly high regularity owing to the condition of possibility of the Zionist outlook. Through the giving of these names, the Zionist outlook rebels against the conventions of exilic Jewish tradition that suppressed the memory of those biblical figures, while also offering an esteemed model for a new type of woman.

### **2.2.2. Stable renewed names from the early 1970s**

The 1960s witnessed high turnover on the 50-most-popular-per-year-names lists for both girls and boys. The lists changed almost completely. During this decade the Israeli melting-pot exerted its impact on those who had come with the great waves of immigration from 1948 through the mid-1950s. The new arrivals were Holocaust survivors from Europe, as well as Jews who had been expelled from the Arab countries of North Africa and from Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. The immigrants retained a sense of belonging to the Jewish people, even if they were not always religiously observant (Shapira, 2012). This sentiment caused them to maintain their patronymic Jewish-naming practices, although in the 1960s they used the names of the local Israeli population that had absorbed them and that consisted of both secular and religious Jews from different streams (Weitman, 1988; Landman, 2018).

In the early 1970s, after this decade of melting-pot activity, additional stable names made it onto the list – four of them biblical: **Ephrat**, **No'ah**, **Na'amah**, and **Hadas**. It is hard to identify similarities of any kind, whether historical or linguistic, between the biblical names in this group, for which no evidence exists of their use during the exilic period (Klar, 1950).

Noah was one of the daughters of Tzlofchad (Zelophehad), who sought to inherit the property of their father who had died without sons. In qualitative interviews, interviewees called Noah “the first feminist.” Although Noah seems at first glance to be a potential member of the assertive-biblical-women category from the previous section, Jewish tradition did not engage with her or with her name during the years of dispersion, as the story of Tzlofchad’s daughters is less central to Jewish mythology. The name Noah appeared on the rare-names list in 1948 and 1951, then disappeared until the early 1970s, when it became common.

The name Hadas comes from the Hebrew name of Esther, **Hadassah**, which itself derives from the name of the “myrtle” plant – Hadas – with the addition of “ah” (*kamatz* + *heh* הָ). During the exilic period the Jews used the name Hadassah with only moderate frequency, as the name Esther was preferred. However, the name Hadas, that of the plant, is an Israeli variant of the name Hadassah. The name Hadas also appeared on the rare-names list in 1948-49, then disappeared until it grew common in the 1970s.

Ephrat is a marginal figure in the Old Testament; she was the wife of Kalev (Caleb), one of the spies sent by Moses into Canaan who, along with Yehoshua (Joshua), sent back a good report. Few Israelis know this story. Efrat is better known as another name for the city of Bethlehem, which was in the ancient territory of the tribe of Yehuda, and the place where Rachel was buried by Yaakov after the birth of her younger son, Binyamin. The name is thus associated with the beloved figure of Rachel. Na’amah is the name of two marginal biblical figures – the sister of Tuval-Kayin, and a wife of King Shlomo (Solomon) who bore his son Rechavam (Rehoboam). Jewish tradition associates a legendary figure named Na’amah with Lilith, the she-demon created before Chavah (Eve). Secular Jews are not familiar with the legend (Landman, 2020), and because the name was found at low levels of prevalence in a sample of ultra-orthodox

girls' names born in the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, one may assume that the legend is not especially well-known among the ultra-orthodox, either (Landman, 2018).

Semantically, there is no common denominator between the names. The meaning of Ephrat is not transparent to Israeli parents, beyond the place name which appears in the story of Yaakov and Rachel. The name Noah is also known only in connection with the biblical story; it bears no clear semantic meaning (Landman, 2020). “Na’amah” derives from the verb *na’am* (to please) with the addition of the suffix “ah” (*kamatz + heh* אָה). “Hadas” is the name of a plant from which the name Hadassah derives. Morphologically, the names Hadas and Na’amah contain a single element, but their patterns differ, as do their grammatical associations – Hadas is a noun, while Naama derives from a verb.

No prominent phonological feature was found for these four names, except for the two syllables in the names Ephrat, Noah, and Hadas. The name Na’amah has three syllables, meaning that it deviates from the phonological pattern of the names in the previous sections. Noah and Na’amah contain the sounds “n” and “ah” (the Hebrew letter *ayin* א). However, there is no similarity of sounds between the names Ephrat and Hadas, or between them and No’ah and Na’amah, making the phonological similarity coincidental here as well.

What is common to the four names in this section is their biblical origin, and the fact that Jewish tradition did not oppose their use, given that they did not exist in the Jewish onomasticon during the exilic period (Weitman, 1988). This is the reason why the names No’ah and Hadas entered the rare-names list, and thereby represented a discourse of new creation charged with new signification, apparent in its difference vis-à-vis the condition of possibility of the socially-normative names. This indicates that the Zionist discourse of 1948, which operated in deliberate opposition to the dictates of

Jewish tradition, underwent a change in the early 1970s, after its triumphant use of the melting pot in the absorption of new immigrants, as evidenced in the popular onomastics of the 1960s (Landman, 2018).

### **2.2.3. New and foreign names from the early 1970s**

Only four non-biblical names became stable – a traditional talisman name that was discussed in the first section, Chayah, and the three names that we will examine in this section, two of which are new names and one of which is foreign.

The two new names, **Shirah** and **Adi**, were created by native Hebrew-speaking parents. The foreign name with no meaning in Hebrew is **Mayah**. On a practical level there is commonality between the names Shirah and Mayah; both became known to the Israeli public through literary texts written by two Israelis who number among the country's most prominent creative figures. *Shirah* is the title of a novel by Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the Israeli writer who won the Nobel Prize in 1966. In the novel, Shirah is the name of the main character, a nurse by profession, and a very assertive woman. "Mayah" is the name of a song written by Shalom Hanoach, one of Israel's most important singer-songwriters, about his daughter. The song "Mayah" appeared in 1970, while the novel *Shirah* was published in 1971. Both names entered the 50-most-popular-names list a short time after these texts were published/released. The name Adi appeared on the rare names list in 1948-1949. The name Shirah appeared on the rare names list in 1951.

Semantically, as noted, the name Mayah is meaningless and thus not transparent to Hebrew speakers. There is no connection between the meanings of the names Shirah (poetry) and Adi (jewel). Semantically the name Adi is talisman names, as the traditional talismanic names - Goldah (gold in Yiddish) and Oro (gold in Judezmo).

Morphologically/syntactically, Shirah and Adi are nouns of different patterns. The obvious phonological similarity between the three names is that they have two syllables, like all the names discussed thus far, except for Ruth and Na'ama. The open “ah” (*kamatz + heh ם-*) suffix in the names Shirah andayah is similar to the suffixes of some of the stable traditional names and is found in No'ah and Na'amah as well.

In practical terms, the names Shirah andayah represent a new, extra-biblical and secular mythology by virtue of being the names of central texts in Israeli culture. These names, which were rare in 1948 and in the early 1950s, reflect a process in which Israeli society shifted from norms based on Jewish tradition and Zionist norms acting in opposition to Jewish tradition, as seen in all of the stable names from 1948, to creation that draws its signification from the values of Israeli society. This creation is represented in the names that appeared during this period on the rare names list – Hadas, No'ah, Adi, and Shirah.

An exception among the stable names discussed in this section is the new name, Adi, which means “jewel” or “ornament.” This meaning recycles the girls’ names created during the years of exile by Jewish communities. In the exilic period, the Jews invented women’s names and used women’s names from local languages. A minority of the names used were Hebrew names such as **Nechamah** (consolation) and **Mazal** (fortune); most were in the languages of the Jews’ neighbors, names such as **Perl** and **Chamamah** (dove in Arabic). The names created during the exilic period were mainly adjectives or nouns bearing positive connotations – beauty, goodness, good luck, and fertility – that were less common in the few boys’ names created during that period (Gompertz, 1957). In terms of content, the name Adi can be classified with these names, thereby forming a contrast to the assertive character of most of the names reviewed here, which are associated with assertive women.

### **3. Discussion**

Data analysis points to three main discourses that have been present in Israel over time. The first and most prominent discourse is the traditional Jewish discourse represented by eight names that have featured on the 50-most-popular-per year-girls'-names list since 1948. These traditional names owe their popularity not only to the historical and mythological prominence of the original biblical figures, but also to the fact that Orthodox societies tend to use a relatively limited onomasticon consisting primarily of the names of central figures in the mythology on which their value systems are based (Wilson, 1998). Indeed, an analysis of the names of ultra-orthodox children in Jerusalem born from the mid-1990s until the early 2000s proves the overwhelming popularity of a relatively small number of traditional names for girls and boys in the various subgroups (Landman, 2018).

Not only does the Jewish discourse have an impact beyond its direct manifestations through the widespread use of traditional names; its influence is also evident in the second discourse still underway in Israeli society – the Zionist discourse. Parents choose the names of female figures from the Bible whose memory was suppressed by Jewish tradition over the generations. The names Tamar, Ya'el, Michal, and Ruth all belong to assertive women who acted in ways disfavored by the Jewish patriarchy through the ages. The choice of these names shows the degree to which Israelis have been eager to emphasize that their values deviate from the conventions of Jewish tradition – a tradition whose dictates regarding proper feminine behavior are well known to both religious and secular Israeli Jews (Landman, 2020).

The only discourse that, at first glance, seems free of the influence of the Jewish discourse is the Israeli discourse that emerged after the melting-pot decade of the 1960s. The seven names that entered the 50-most-popular-per year-names list in the early 1970s – four “renewed” biblical names: Ephrat, Na’amah, No’ah, and Hadas; two new names: Adi and Shirah; and one foreign name: Mayah – do not reflect adherence to Jewish tradition, but neither do they contradict that tradition, with the exception of Na’amah, who figures in Jewish legends of a negative nature – though those legends are not well known to the Israeli public (Landman, 2020).

This discourse started out as creation during the early years of Israeli statehood, as can be seen from the names Hadas, No’ah, Adi and Shirah, which appeared on the rare names list. Through the use of these names as creation per the discursive characteristics defined by Foucault, the signification of the Israeli discourse emerges – a discourse based on a deep connection with the Bible. However, the connection to the Bible is not religious in this instance, but rather cultural and historical.

The fact that the Bible is the Jewish people’s most significant onomastic corpus even today can be seen in the fact that 15 of the 19 stable names were taken from the Bible. The fact that 13 of the 15 biblical figures are those of assertive women who operated in a patriarchal world without relinquishing their goals poses a desirable feminine model for modern Israeli women and girls, even those who live in a traditional world that still operates along patriarchal lines.

No shared linguistic feature was found for these 19 names, nor was a shared linguistic characteristic found between the three groups discussed above. The sole phonological feature that stood out – a two-syllable structure – is a feature shared by most Israeli names (Landman, 2016). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in the case of the name No’ah, the sounds of the name appear to have been the decisive factor

behind its popularity, in contrast to the traditional-names group from the Jewish discourse, and to the renewed-names group from the Zionist discourse. No'ah was only one of five daughters of Tzlofchad who sought to obtain their share of their father's inheritance. The names of her sisters have not enjoyed similar standing within the Israeli onomasticon. Two of the sisters' names have been rejected due to unattractive associations – Machlah, originally “link in a chain,” but similar in sound to *machala* which means “disease”; and Choglah, the name of a bird. Both other names, Milkah and Tirtzah, sound less pleasant to the Israeli ear (Landman, 2016). No'ah, the daughter of Tzlofchad, became familiar to the Israeli public, although the biblical text gives equal treatment to all five sisters. The consonant “n” in No'ah appears to be responsible for the name's greater popularity. An analysis of all the girls' names that have made it onto the 50-most-popular—per year-names list since 1948 shows that the consonants “n,” “l,” and “r” find particular favor among Israeli parents, especially for girls' names (Landman, 2016).

Another seemingly prominent phonological feature of the names is the *kamatz-heh* (“ah” אַח) suffix. However, of the 19 names, only nine end with *kamatz-heh*, making it difficult to argue that the names owe their popularity to the suffix. The fact that no linguistic feature was found to exclusively characterize the stable names proves that textual affiliations – to the Bible and to two texts by important Israeli creative figures that highlighted the names Shirah andayah – are responsible for the stable status of these names among the Israeli public. The preference for narrative affiliations over standout linguistic features can be understood in terms of Derrida's contention (1990) that given names are not an integral part of a language, as they are untranslatable. When given names are translated according to their semantic content, they lose their identity as given names.



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