



# What's In A Name 2011-10-24

## **"Jewish names are a code for understanding Jewish culture and Jewish history and the vicissitudes that occurred to the Jewish people over the years", Professor Aaron Demsky, Bar-Ilan University ,2011**

It is possible to trace the events of Jewish history simply by studying the names borne by Jews in certain times and places. Jewish names tell our story, our heritage, our past and our hopes for the future. "The investigation of a Jewish family name is charged with all the suspense of a thrilling detective story," says Ben Zion Kaganoff in his "Dictionary of Jewish Names and Their History".

Onomastics ( or onomatology) is the study of proper names, including family names. It's a fascinating subject of tremendous scope which scholars approach not only based on linguistics, but also on sociology, psychology, geography, history, politics, philosophy and a whole range of other academic subjects.

Based on the work of many dedicated scholars, experts and researchers, NameYourRoots has compiled a database of Jewish names to facilitate specific name study . It is a collection of data relevant to persons worldwide sharing a particular name. The database includes information on the origin and meaning of family names, locations, and a wide array of sources where this name has been cited. Our database focuses on Sephardic Jewish surnames originating in Spain and Portugal. If your name is on our database, this could be an indicator of having Sephardic ancestors from the Iberian Peninsula.

However, the fact that you find a surname on our database does not necessarily mean that a given surname is exclusively Jewish. Some of the most common surnames of the Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries like Lopez, Rodriguez or Perez are typical of Sephardic Jews. And just because you have a Jewish last name does not make a person Jewish. Having said that, it could be that your family was Jewish and running away from the Catholic Inquisition. Perhaps they converted to Catholicism in order to save their lives. In other words, these names are an indication of Jewish roots, and not a confirmation of them. **If you wish to explore further, you will find on our website other possible indicators of Jewish roots such as [DNA](#), [genealogy](#), and [customs](#).**

### **Where do Jewish surnames come from ?**

The origins of ancient Jewish names go back to the unique structure of Jewish society. Historically, Jews did not have family surnames at all. Within the Jewish community, we used patronymics, such as David ben (son of) Joseph or Sarah bat (daughter of) Aaron. Names in that form are still used in synagogues and in Jewish legal documents such as the ketubah (marriage contract).

Except for aristocrats, wealthy people and prosperous merchants, Jews did not assume surnames in Eastern Europe prior to the Napoleonic era in the early 19th century. Most of the Ashkenazi Jews (Jews of central or eastern European descent) from countries captured by Napoleon including Russia, Poland, and Germany, were ordered to get surnames. The reason for this was far from benevolent - it was to facilitate tax collection. After Napoleon's defeat many Jews dropped their surnames and returned to "son of" names like Mendelsohn. Iacobson. Levinson. etc. When Jews

adopted family names in the 18th and 19th centuries, the choice was frequently patronymic, and first names thus became family names.

Although family names did not catch on among Ashkenazi Jews until much later, family names began to gain popularity among Sephardic Jews in Spain, Portugal and Italy as early as the 10th or 11th century but they did not become frequent until the 12th century when some originally individual surnames started to be inherited from generation to generation within the same family. Here too the aristocracy usually adopted inherited surnames early on and the peasants did so later. It is important to note that throughout history Jews have set value on adhering to distinctly Jewish names, hence the names even in this early period can be easily distinguished from the Christian and Muslim names of the time.

The vast majority of the medieval population, including the nobility, was illiterate, except for priests and public notaries so there are no books from this period. What do exist are some documents from the Portuguese and Spanish kingdoms containing the surnames of Jews in those countries and lists of Christianized Jews accused of crimes of Judaism. Many of these names are used by their descendants to this very day.

The Jews from Iberia, known as the Sephardim, generally bore names of Portuguese and Spanish linguistic origin. A large proportion of the names are of Latin-Romance origin, although many are of Hebrew derivations and others appear to be in the Arabic language, as the Arabs and Moors are given credit for bringing surnames as we know them to Spain during their conquest.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Jews wishing to maintain their faith were forced to go underground, crypto-Jews changed their names and adopted aliases to hide their Jewish origins and avoid persecution. As a result of the Spanish Inquisition it was common for a Marrano family to choose the name of the Church where they were baptized into the Christian faith, or adopt the name of their Christian "sponsors" or "godparents", so that many names are associated with Christian families and are certainly not exclusive to Jews. Some speculate that all names ending in ez in Spain and es (meaning son of), denote Sephardic heritage.

### **How are Jewish names classified ?**

Curiously, even the earliest recorded names fall into most of the same categories used by modern researchers to classify Jewish surnames. In fact, most cultures use surnames developed from one or more of these classifications.

These include toponymic names based on geographical locations or any topographic or other local features of the landscape, such as Toledano , Castro, Spinoza, to name but a few Sephardic names , or Shapiro (from Shpeier in German), Litvak (from Lithuania) and Englander (from England) for Ashkenazi Jews.

Patronymic names are names derived from proper names such as Enriquez (son of Henrique), Mendes (son of Mendo), and Martinez (son of Martin) among Sephardim or Abramson (son of Abraham), Jacobson (son of Jacob), Mendelson (son of Mendel) among Ashkenazim. Due to the importance of the role played by Jewish woman, there are also matronymic surnames, which are names based on the mother's given name, such as Estrin (son of Esther), Rivkin (son of Rivka), Feigelson (son of Feiga) and Rachlin (son of Rachel) .

Another classification are occupational names relating to one's profession or branch of commerce include Calderon (pot maker), Molina (miller) and Tapiero (mason), as well as Katzav (butcher), Shneider (tailor), or Farber (dyer).

Among the names based on personal characteristic, whether it be appearance or character, we can cite Abastado (rich), Laniado (hairy), and Bibas (smart) or Gross (large) and Klein (short), Rothbart (red beard), Gutman (good man), and Ehrlich (honorable man) . In the Middle Ages, a person acquired this type of name from friends and acquaintances. A surname of this sort can be complimentary, uncomplimentary or simply descriptive.

Biblical surnames which are derived from the Old Testament include Gabriel, Abravanel and Uziel. Rabbinical names are based on male descendants of the Jerusalem Temple rabbis such as Cohen , Levy ,and Kaganovitz.

Two additional categories are compound names (formed by the father's and mother's names) and artificial names (names with no connection to origin or characteristics) such as Oliveira (olive tree), Carduso (thorny plant), Pinto (chick) and Esperanza (hope). Among the Ashkenazim we find Applebaum (apple tree), Schonberg (beautiful mountain) and Blumenthal (flower of the valley).

There are variations for many of the surnames on our database which are not surprising when considering the mass migrations to which the Jews were subject, and the subsequent adaptations of new languages and alphabets. This accounts for different spellings, prefixes, and suffixes.

**Typical family names have been used by Spanish and Portuguese Jews, Conversos and crypto-Jews, and many are found today in Hispanic and Sephardic communities throughout the world, so that whilst on your journey you just might discover others on the road to discovering their roots who happen to have the same surname as you. We invite you to share your newfound knowledge and experiences with us as you [Name Your Roots...](#)**