

Nicknames

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

My father loved giving nicknames. My younger brother Michael was called Mickey, and my youngest brother was called Buster. I was Rooky. That came from my Hebrew name, Yerucham. The English could not pronounce the guttural Chet sounds so it became Yerookam, and from that came Rooky, which stayed with me until my first rabbinic position, when I thought that it sounded a trifle too childish for the dignity of my new position.

As headmaster my father extended nicknames to his favorite pupils. They ranged from Yiddishisms, such as Joseph becoming Yossel and Jacob becoming Yankel, to "Hippy" for a "Highly Intelligent Person", or "Sparky" for someone very bright. But in all the cases that I can recall, the nicknames were always meant as a sign of affection. This is certainly true in the Jewish tradition, where there is a strong custom dating back to the Talmud against using words and names to disparage or hurt people. All name changes in the Bible record a rise in a person's spiritual or material status, and many rabbis had nicknames too—most of them affectionate, even if Reysh Lakish ("thickhead") doesn't sound it.

Yiddish nicknames tend to be overwhelmingly affectionate, adding a "le" at the end: Mamaleh, Abbaleh, Moishela. Others are based on local linguistic characteristics. In truth, one can find examples of cross-cultural borrowing everywhere. Polish nicknames often end with an "ush" and Russian with a "kush." Russian novels are a treasure store of nicknames. Slavs prefer "ik" at the end. Hebrew speakers tend to prefer affectionate shortenings like Ruti, Nati, Shuli, Gabi, Yoni, Shlomi, and Chani, for examples.

In the English speaking world, we have a range of options, sometimes associated with class. Abbreviating names—Bob instead of Robert, Chas instead of Charles, Dick for Richard, or as in our family case, Mic for Michael. Aristocrats go for such improbables as Chumley for Cholmondeley, or Keys instead of Caius. In England some nicknames are traditionally associated with a person's surname. A man with the surname Miller might be nicknamed Dusty (after the flour dust of a miller at work). There are several other nicknames linked traditionally with a person's surname, including Chalky White, Bunny Warren, Tug Wilson, and Spud Baker.

Other English nicknames allude to a person's origins. A Scotsman may be nicknamed Jock, an Irishman, Paddy or Mick, a Welshman, Taffy. Nicknames can also be ironic. A man with red hair will be called Blue or Bluey. A tall man will be called Shorty, an obese person Slim. English nicknaming was common through the first half of the 20th century and was frequently used in the armed services during World Wars I and II. My father did not serve in the English armed forces, but he was briefly an army chaplain after the Second World War, helping reconstitute Jewish life in occupied Europe. So perhaps his fondness for nicknames came from that experience.

In Arabic, nicknames, are known as *kunyas*. Which is interesting because the Hebrew, which is much older (sorry Abbas, we wuz there first), is *Kunoy* or *Kinoy*. Its use in ancient times was as an honorific name substituted for the original as an act of respect. As in not using God's name as written when speaking. Which brings us back full circle to the way names are used. Euphemisms occur in the Talmud quite often, calling a blind person "Sagi Naor" which means "A lot of light." This was not meant derogatorily at all.

Nicknames though, do have a darker side. Judas means a traitor, after the mythical character in the New Testament who betrayed another mythical character. All Jews are Judases. Slaves were given nicknames both as a way of emphasizing their servitude, dehumanizing them, and as a cover to escape. Racists to this day love using terms of abuse and derogatory names—like yid, kike, nigger, towel-head—for anyone they hate. And now the internet offers other means, such as bracketing names of people with (()) to indicate that they may be Jewish (when often they are not).

We live in a world very far from one where ethics demanded respect for other people even if you disagreed with them. Our world is one of intensified linguistic bullying, which has now been exponentially increased thanks to the internet and social media. Nicknames are the least of it, but even so are often a halfway stage towards serious abuse. But we have gone so far the other way that using "sweetheart" is now sexual harassment. Nicknames are the least of the problems. But that doesn't mean they might not be a problem.

It is now acceptable to be abusive and derogatory whoever you are. At one stage this past year the abuse seemed to be related exclusively to Trump. Even I often call him Thump! Once the Republicans were the baddies, now the Democrats are the bad losers and masters of rude, crude, and public disrespect and abuse. That's about the only thing I miss about British society, the conventions of Parliament to call an opponent "an honorable gentleman guilty of a terminological inexactitude" rather than "a bloody effing liar." The mess is the same. The style only differs.

Where we are loose or careless or insensitive in our use of language, it begins by offending and demeaning individuals and it inevitable spreads and infects society at large. It began at universities with shouting down and intimidating Jewish speakers over Israel. Now has now morphed into aggression and violence against any political alternative. Anyone supporting Israel will be made to feel very uncomfortable in organizations that support Blacks, Women and now LBGT. You start abusing the Jews and you end up abusing everyone you disagree with, as theologian Martin Niemoller said.

As Proverbs said a very long time ago, "Are you a person who values life, who wants to live a long and good life? Then guard your tongue from evil or your lips from speaking deceitfully."