NAMING THE MATRIARCHY

Often, women have had their names confiscated: married name, Ellis Island name, uninvited nickname. Here, three "deciders" seize the power of choosing, in ways big and small, bullish and inventive, multicultural and intellectual, norm-shattering and unapologetically subversive. Lilith welcomes the game changers.

My Hyphen

by ANNA SCHNUR-FISHMAN

I like it.

Family friends recently hyphenated their baby daughter, too. One day we were standing around their kitchen when a gaiety struck me and I burst out: "I can't wait until Leah grows up and learns about her hyphen!"

That was when I realized that *I* love and am proud of my hyphen.

Leah's parents were surprised by how many of their parenting friends *didn't* choose to hyphenate—for one reason or another, the kid seemed to get Dad's last name: Mom was estranged from her family; Mom had other siblings to carry on her name but Dad didn't; Dad's was more Jewish or less Jewish or whatever they were looking for. After a while, the ratio seemed more than coincidental.

I too am disturbed by the number of young, forward-thinking, liberal and feminist-identified couples opting for only Dad's name. In a language class some years ago, each student explained the origin of his or her name. I said, "I have two last names. Sometimes people think it's because I'm married, and sometimes people think it's because my parents aren't married, but it's actually because my parents are feminists." A second hyphenated student said her mother now regrets "doing that to" her—giving her the burdensome double last name. Our female professor said she considered hyphenating her daughter, but also didn't want to "do that to her." A friend to whom I repeated the conversation told me that she had her mom's maiden name as a middle name because her parents, too, were feminists…but that's not the same!, I wanted to say.

Yes, I understand that double last names are unwieldy (no really—I do). Yet at the end of my life, however much time I have spent carefully spelling out the second of my last names over the phone to dentist-appointment schedulers and the like (20 hours? 40 hours?) will have been entirely worth it. My surname is the most concrete way that I know my parents believe in their equality, in the equality of the sexes, and in their shared role in childrearing. Their choice also ineluctably taught me that sometimes, to keep your life in line with your values, you have to consider options that are off the beaten track. I wouldn't want to be named any other way; nor would I name my children any other way.

And yes, I know that children cannot practically accumulate the surnames of each of their ancestors over the generations. The goal here is not one of overwrought sentimentality—to carry on every family name forevermore—but to eschew sexism.

So I am not insisting that my grandchildren be, for instance, the Rifkin-Gold-Fleishman-Dali-Zynek-Borsky-Schnur-Fishman family, nor am I calling as evidence the places around the world where it is common to memorize ancestors' names going back many generations.

Indeed, I have thought long and hard about all of this, and I've worked out a system I'd like to share: Women, pass on mothers' names; men, pass on fathers'.

Example: Schnur is my mother's name and Fishman is my father's. Let's say they have me and an imaginary brother, Otto, and an imaginary sister, Petunia. Otto and Petunia and I are all lucky enough to procreate with imaginary offspring of very famous political couples:

Petunia Schnur-Fishman + Derek Rodham-Clinton
Joey Schnur-Clinton and Barbie Schnur-Clinton
Here Petunia passes on her mom's name (Schnur) and Derek passes on his dad's (Clinton).

Otto Schnur-Fishman + Etta Rodham-Clinton
Elena Fishman-Rodham and Dror Fishman-Rodham
Here Otto passes on his dad's name (Fishman), and Etta her mom's (Rodham).

Anna Schnur-Fishman + Melissa Heinz-Kerry
Georgette Schnur-Heinz and George Schnur-Heinz
Here both of us pass on our respective moms' names.

Parents can opt to change their own names to match their kids', or keep their pre-nuptial handles.

A similar system is used in parts of Mexico, Mozambique, the Iberian Peninsula and elsewhere, though usually both parents pass on their fathers' names. The glitch in my system has to do with queer families: Whose name would *my* kids, Georgette and George, pass on, having lesbian parents? Georgette has *two* moms' names and George has no dad's name. And whose name do folks pass on if they don't identify with one gender or the other? Write to me if you figure this out.

Having thought long and hard about hyphens, I've worked out a system.

When you've lived as a hyphenate, you get to experience utilitarian benefits, too. For instance, I once emailed a stranger at work who replied, "Is there any chance you are *not* the offspring of Shoshe Schnur, whom I knew a million years ago in New York, and her husband Lenny Fishman?" This would never have happened if I were only Schnur or only Fishman, and in a world where apples roll geographically far from the tree, last names that confirm a certain origin are ever more useful.

In another take on this, at the bar mitzvah of a distant relative recently—I love this family, but usually have trouble remembering our exact genealogical relationship—I was contentedly spacing out in *shul* when something made me snap back to attention. It was his grandmother being called to the Torah: "*Ta'amod*, Anita *bat* Conrad *v'*Ruth." Conrad and Ruth—they're Conrad-'n-Ruth, my grandfather's uncle and aunt…making the bar mitzvah boy my third cousin, which I will not forget again.

I know that hyphenated names are often not very pretty, especially when two Ashkenazi families come together to produce a mouthful of consonants. As a kid, I loved to read the Yizkor plaques on synagogue walls—long bronze plaques, often running the length of an entire wall, listing the names of deceased congregants—to find the prettiest names. Next to each one is a light bulb, which is lit only a few times a year, at the anniversary of the person's death and when Yizkor is recited. I still remember the name Chaim Leaf from my childhood synagogue; it was my favorite. And I look out for beautiful names in general—on a plaque in my college library that named Trustees of 1949, for instance, I remember discovering the lovely Anna Canada Swain.

But that's appreciation, not jealousy; I wouldn't trade my name for any other.

If you can give your child a sense of humor and a little patience along with his or her hyphen (because, say, the surname might be too long to fit in the school computer system by just one letter, which for some reason gets bumped to the front of the first name, and on the first day of every class, roll call includes the name Nanna Schnurfishma)—then go ahead, parents. Hyphenate in good health! ■

Anna Schnur-Fishman studied linguistics at Brown University and is happy to consult on naming decisions.

So, Baby Schultz, What Will You Call Me?

by SUSAN GELFMAN

Thank goodness you haven't arrived yet so I can still figure it out. You've got four choices: Grandma, Nana, *Bubbe* (Yiddish for grandmother) or *Savta* (Hebrew for grandmother). Am I making this too complicated? Impossible! Whatever you may be—boy or girl—you will be a *chacham*, a wise person, a genius!

"What difference does it all make?" you may ask, grandchild of mine. Once your *Ima*'s, or mother's, mother was not Jewish. When I decided to become a Jew, like you, I chose a new name. I thought and thought and thought some more. I picked two names. One was Tirzah, a Jewish name from the Song of Songs. The other was Shoshana, for my own name, Susan. I remembered the name my parents gave me and I also took these new names. Even more so, Baby Schultz, I will think and think about the new name you will call me.

I, Tirzah Shoshana, am complicated, too. I am a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Daughter of the American Revolution and for 30-plus years now, a Jew. My daughter, also known as your Ima-to-be, is now not only a Jew and an American, but a citizen of Israel. You, Baby Schultz, who will be born in the holy city of Safed, will be a *sabra*, a native Israeli.

Bubbe? Real bubbes have grandmothers with Yiddish names like Mindel and Fayge and Sheindel. They sound like the daughters in *Fiddler on the Roof* who could burst into "Tradition" at any moment. They certainly don't have grandmothers named Mary who became a faculty bride in the *shtetl* [small town] of Williamstown, Massachusetts and spent summer Sundays at Quaker meeting waiting for the spirit to strike.

Real bubbes came from places like Pinsk or Minsk. My bubbe grew up in the Republic of Cambridge, Massachusetts, home of Harvard University and all spectrums of the rainbow coalition. Many, many bubbes back, her ancestors were immigrants too, but they came to Plymouth Rock in the 17th century, not to Ellis Island in the nineteenth.

Nana wears tartans. Savta doesn't take any guff from taxi drivers. Grandmas are an equal-opportunity job category, open to all comers.

Real bubbes make a mean matzah ball. They don't immediately panic and run to the store for the Manischevitz matzah ball mix. If they made only two matzah balls, *dayenu*, it would have been enough. Two of their matzah balls would multiply and fill up your entire digestive tract. They don't make matzah balls that sink to the bottom of the soup bowl or disintegrate into clumps of gelatinous sludge at the top.

Real bubbes actually speak Yiddish, preferably when they don't want the American children to know what they're saying. They don't confine themselves to Yiddish insults: *they should have stones, not children*. All this is giving me a *kopveytik*, a headache. I don't think I'm destined to become a bubbe.

Perhaps I could be a savta then. After all, Baby Schultz, you will be a sabra, living between the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee. It would only be fitting, yes? First off we have a basic problem. I can never remember which word means grandma and which word means grandpa. Does savta mean grandma or is it grandpa? Perhaps you can be a truly liberated child of two American immigrants and have two grandmas or two grandpas.

Real savtas know whether Ariel Sharon is alive or dead or in some bizarre state of suspended animation. They know what prominent politicians are on the take and how many terms Teddy Kollek was mayor of Jerusalem. Real savtas know how many days Gilad Shalit was held captive. They know what land was part of Israel before 1967 and what is now considered the territories, whatever Americans may have to say about it.

Real savtas are scrappy. They don't take any guff from taxi drivers and demand that they put on the *monit*, the meter, instead of paying a fee fit only for tourists. They know how to drive in Israel without becoming a traffic fatality. During the intifada, they elbowed their way onto Jerusalem buses, vehicles which might blow up and scatter their remains on the sidewalk. They have grandsons who never came back from the War in Lebanon or clashes on the West Bank and in Gaza. They do not have husbands who were conscientious objectors and who are ambivalent about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. No, sorry, sabra Schultz, I cannot be a savta.

IMAGE VIA WIKIMEDIA

Perhaps being a grandma is the way to go. Grandmas are an equal-opportunity job category, open to all comers. They celebrate Christmas or Chanukah or Kwanzaa. Or perhaps celebrate Christmas and Chanukah and Kwanzaa. They grew up in Sandusky, Ohio or Scarsdale, New York or the South Bronx. They voted for Obama or McCain, or perhaps did not vote at all. They are the face of the melting pot. But do I really want to blend in? Isn't part of being a Jew to be somehow apart?

So what's it to be, Baby Schultz? Nana, perhaps. Real nanas speak with a brogue or a Scottish burr. They know how to pronounce Edinburgh and Siobhan. Their nana's nana spoke Gaelic. They will actually eat a haggis, even if it is a sheep intestine.

Nanas have names like Campbell with a long and inglorious history. They have not been forgiven for the Massacre at Glencoe in the Scottish Highlands over 300 years ago. After enjoying the hospitality of the MacDonalds for a week, Campbells killed 78 of their unarmed hosts. Tour guides still point out their dastardly deeds. They have ancestral castles which dun them for money for their upkeep. They'll sell anyone a coat of arms, C.O.D. Close your ears, Baby Schultz, the Campbell coat of arms has a big yellow boar's head. Not for eating, of course. Their motto is "*ne obliviscaris*," "never forget" to the non-Latin speakers among us.

Nanas wear tartans. The Campbell tartan is like the Black Watch plaid, navy and forest green. A nana would know whether it was the tartan of the Campbells of Argyll or the Campbells of Cawdor. (Psst, Baby Schultz, keep it simple. You can get a Campbell tie at L.L. Bean. I wonder if they have a crib blanket?)

So, Baby Schultz, the time is fast approaching that I must decide. The fact is that you will have plenty of bubbe-ness and savta-ness. Your *Abba*'s [father's] mother makes an unsinkable matzah ball. You will have plenty of savtas pinching your cheek in the supermarket and watching out for you on the street. That's what Israelis do. You won't forget the grandmas either as you listen to your parents talk in English and speak Hebrew with their foreign inflections. But who will keep the memory of the nanas? Just me, this Nana. It's about the feel of a wool tartan scarf against my cheek and the echoes of Scotland the Brave at my Dad's memorial. As all Jews know, it's about remembering. ■

Susan Gelfman is a first-generation Jew and a 13th-generation American who writes about the ironies of this strange heritage.

Que(e)rying the Matrilineal Principle

by SUSAN GOLDBERG

I remember clearly the day that my religious studies teacher, Rabbi Meyerovitch, explained to us—a group of seventh-grade girls at the private Jewish elementary school I attended in Vancouver, British Columbia—the rabbinic law that determined who got to be "born Jewish."

He was about as direct as one might expect a grizzled, sixty-something Orthodox man to be about such matters, but he tried his best. A child follows the religion of the mother, he explained, because—and here he coughed—"well… you can always be sure of who the mother is."

We looked at him blankly.

He continued: "But ...you can't always be sure of the father."

It took me a few minutes, but I caught on eventually. At the time, the rabbinic logic made perfect sense to my 12-year-old mind: if any poor shmuck pointed out by the mother could conceivably be the father, then of course the baby should follow the religion of the "knowable" parent, the parent to whose body it was irrefutably, undeniably tethered. Fatherhood as a concept was murky, shifting. But motherhood? You could count on that. You could see it with the naked eye.

I was drawn, I suspect, to what I now know is called the "matrilineal principle" of Jewish identity for reasons beyond its putative logic. It was, in effect, the equivalent of a "get out of jail free" card for Conservative Jewish girls like me, girls who weren't entirely convinced that they would grow up to marry nice Jewish boys, preferably lawyers or doctors. While I had no definite plans to marry outside the fold of Judaism, I knew my adolescent self well enough to sense that I might one day entertain the possibility. And it was comforting to know that even if, one day, I married a *goy*, I would still be able to provide my parents with

the ultimate prize: Jewish grandchildren. It seemed like one of the few instances in which—religiously, at least—I had the upper hand over my brother.

Twenty five years later, things have played out in ways I never quite imagined. I am married, yes, but not to a nice Jewish boy. My spouse is nice, yes, but is a (mostly) lapsed Catholic, and is most definitely not a boy. (For what it's worth, Rachel is a doctor, although, as we like to joke, not the kind of doctor who can take out your appendix.)

And then there are our children: two boys, age seven and four. Two boys with two mommies, one Jewish and one Catholic.

When I met her, Rachel adamantly did not want to have children—let alone be pregnant. That was fine with me: at the age of 22, children were on the far periphery of my vision. I had plenty of time, I thought, to figure out the baby thing. If I decided children were a priority, I could try to convince Rachel to come along for the adventure, or, heartbreakingly, go it alone. Either way, the children would be Jewish.

Those assumptions were challenged when, several years later, Rachel's youngest sister, at the time living in Tanzania, sent around an email message announcing that she was "up the duff." Rachel, to my shock, immediately got broody. All of a sudden, motherhood and pregnancy—potentially *her* pregnancy—had moved from the periphery to the center, and we began a complex and protracted discussion of exactly what all of this might entail.

We had one crucial variable covered: a willing sperm donor that we'd picked out, just in case, years before. Rob was that perfect and rare commodity: a healthy, smart, handsome and sweet gay man who liked kids but had no interest in raising his own. We struck gold with Rob. The fact that he wasn't Jewish was, from my perspective, just a minor blip—as long as I was the one getting pregnant. The matrilineal principle would render the babies automatically Jewish—no harm, no foul.

But when Rachel began to ponder the possibility of getting pregnant herself, I found myself struggling. In part, for a variety of personal, financial, and career-related reasons, I didn't feel ready to be a parent, period. But—standing at the crossroads of *interfaith* and *same-sex*—I was confused and torn about what it might mean for me to be the Jewish, non-biological mother of children borne by my Gentile spouse, with the help of our Gentile donor. Would the kids be Jewish? According to whom? Did it really matter, and why?

Further, why was it that biology and a single ancient rabbinical law held so much sway over my perspective? No other Jewish laws did. I had no problem flaunting, say, rabbinic proscriptions against women engaging in sexual acts with other women. I didn't keep kosher, didn't keep the Sabbath, had undoubtedly worn linen-wool blends. I didn't even believe in God. And yet, here I was, clinging to a fairly arbitrary principle that seemed to go against the rest of my politics. Why, for example, was it acceptable—or even possible—to transmit identity to offspring through one gender but not the other? And the whole idea of the inherent "knowability" of the (biological) mother made little sense in the context of queer parenting, where family is as much if not more about chosen—and earned—kinship ties than biology. Plus, the matrilineal principle is at heart sexist, based on a premise that women are not to be trusted. "That baby," the rabbis thought, "well, it could be anyone's."

And yet, there I was, holding on to the idea that the only way that my kids could be Jewish, short of Rachel converting, would be for me to give birth to them. (Rachel, by the way, had no intention of converting, and refused the notion of converting a baby. "Nobody's dunking my kid in water and washing away its *goyishe* mother," she said. I could hardly argue.)

I should note that, in two-mom households where one partner gives birth, it's common for non-biological mothers to worry that they will not have the same bond to the baby as the partner who carried and gave birth and perhaps breast-fed—they fret that they won't have their partner's physiological and genetic ties to the kids, and that that will make them, somehow, less equal as parents.

It may well be that my fears around our children's religious status were related to these issues, but the more I pondered it, the more I realized that something else was at play: my unexamined beliefs about Judaism itself as an essential, biological, even racial, identity. If Jewishness is inherent, that is, then one's birth, as opposed to one's actions, determine identity. So, my twisted logic went, it didn't matter whether I drove on Saturdays or ate BLTs or married a woman. *I was still Jewish.* I might be a bad Jew, or at least a very non-observant Jew, but I was *essentially* Jewish. And I wanted to pass that essence on to my children.

To be fair, I did have one powerful reason to think of Judaism as a genetic identity: my family history of breast cancer, undeniably mapped out in our DNA from generation to generation. We suspect that my maternal great-grandmother may have died of breast cancer. We know for certain that my maternal grand-

IMAGE VIA WIKIMEDIA

mother died of ovarian cancer in her late forties. My mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer at the age of 37, and with breast cancer a decade later. By the time she was diagnosed yet again—a recurrence of breast cancer, now metastasized—genetic research had identified the mutation in the BRCA gene that was responsible for both my mother's and grandmother's cancer. They also confirmed that one in 45 Ashkenazi Jews carries the mutation, as opposed to one in 800 to 1000 people in the general population. My own doctors were following me closely: I had a one in two chance of inheriting the potentially deadly mutation. I tended to imagine my ovaries, my breasts, as pairs of ticking time bombs. For me, being Jewish and being genetically at risk were inextricably linked.

To further complicate my confusion, my mother's latest battle with cancer overlapped with Rachel's and my ongoing baby discussions. If children had once been on the periphery of my vision, my mother's failing health made my desire for a child—more specifically, my desire to be pregnant—visceral. I wanted my parents, but my mother in particular, to meet my children, her grandchildren. I wanted her to accept them wholeheartedly. I wanted to make her happy.

I am in charge of the ethics of what it means to be, at once, a Jew, queer, spouse, mother, daughter.

By this point, nearly a decade into my relationship with Rachel, my parents had embraced their queer, Catholic daughter-in-law as one of the family. And yet I harbored the suspicion that they might not be fully prepared to accept as their own—and as Jewish—grandchildren borne by my Gentile girlfriend. I talked about it with my mother only once, fairly early on, when Rachel was still quite intent on getting pregnant. The conversation was awkward. "And this would be your child, too?" asked my mother.

"Yes," I said. "I would legally adopt it."

"And we would be the grandparents?"

"Yes," I said, firmly. "Just as you would be the grandparents of any child I adopted." My tone, I hoped, conveyed the unspoken *you'd better get used to it* appended to the end of the sentence. We didn't say much more.

You'd better get used to it. It was potent advice. And I came to realize that I needed to take it myself. I needed to get used to the idea that, for better or for worse, *I* was in charge of the ethics of what it meant for me to be, at once, a Jew, queer, a spouse, a mother, a daughter. I had to give up all my "get out of jail free" cards: my deference to ancient and arbitrary rules, my conflation of genetics with "identity." I needed to step up, create my own rules, and take responsibility for my particular brands of religion, culture, family. If I wanted to convince my parents that my children were their grandchildren, I needed to believe it myself.

Our older son was born three days after what would have been my mother's sixtieth birthday, six months after she finally succumbed to her 20-year, on-again-off-again, battle with cancer. He is named for her, and not a single day goes by that I do not ache at the fact that she has never met him, or his younger brother. Before our second son was conceived, I finally got up the nerve to get tested for the BRCA mutations. As it turns out, I am not a carrier: that particular link in the genetic chain connecting me to my maternal ancestors has been, happily, broken. With that break, however, seems to have come more room for the possibility of creating my own way forward.

As for motherhood, it turns out that it's not necessarily easily visible. The kinship ties of our little family, at least, are rarely immediately clear to strangers. The biological details of our sons' conceptions and births have never been secret, but Rachel and I divulge them carefully, to distinguish between those who ask about them out of supportive curiosity and those who ask out of the discomfort of not knowing and the need to inscribe some (hetero)normative idea of family onto ours.

The children are Jewish, and Rachel and I are raising them in a Jewish household. Our traditions continue to develop and evolve, and include plenty of room for celebrations with my extended Jewish family and my Gentile in-laws—not to mention with Rob and his family. Sometimes we fall back on the comfort of the traditions I grew up with: lighting the candles and saying the blessing over wine and challah every Friday night. Sometimes we break with tradition to figure out ways of celebrating that make sense to us: making "Esther" and "Vashti" flags to wave as we tell the story of Purim, including "*Kos Miriam*" on our Seder plate as a reminder of Jewish women's contributions to the Exodus and Jewish life.

The boys are Jewish not because of who gave birth to them, but because of what Rachel and I have decided feels right to us as partners and as co-parents. When they're older, they may choose other paths, and we will do our best to support them. Occasionally, the responsibility and the sheer work involved in creating our own path forward feel overwhelming, but it's necessary work if we want our children to make informed, responsible decisions about their lives, rather than simply deferring to unexamined authority. Until the kids are old enough to make their own decisions, a new brand of matrilineality reigns at our house, and it is this: we're the moms, so we get to decide. ■

[I am indebted to Shaye J.D. Cohen's analysis of the matrilineal principle in *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* and to Elaine Chapnik's essay, "Through The Rabbinic Lens: A Study of *Hilchot Lesbiut*," in the anthology *Keep Your Wives Away from Them: Orthodox Women, Unorthodox Desires*.]

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