



“Mocking Abcde’s name was wrong, but so is setting a child up for mockery” -Vinay Menon, Toronto Star, November 30, 2018

As someone who grew up with an unusual name, my heart goes out to 5-year-old Abcde and the ordeal she recently endured as an airline passenger. Before a flight from California to Texas this month, the girl’s moniker — Abcde is pronounced “ab-city” — caught the attention of an employee with Southwest Airlines. It was as if the kid had three heads. In an interview with an ABC affiliate in Los Angeles, the girl’s mother recalled what happened next. “The gate agent started laughing, pointing at me and my daughter, talking to other employees,” said Traci Redford. “So I turned around and said, ‘Hey, if I can hear you, my daughter can hear you. So I’d appreciate if you’d just stop.’” But it seems the gate agent was just getting started. “While I was sitting there, she took a picture of my boarding pass and chose to post it on social media, mocking my daughter,” said Redford, who tried to convert the ridicule into a teachable moment. “(Abcde) said, ‘Mom, why is she laughing at my name?’ And I said, ‘Not everyone is nice and not everyone is going to be nice and it’s unfortunate.’” Exactly. The actions of this gate agent were unfortunate and unprofessional. No child should be openly teased, especially over something out of her control. There is no excuse. That’s why Southwest apologized. But at the risk of also blaming the victims in this name-shaming incident, are we just supposed to gloss over the fact this woman named her child Abcde? Unless there is a family history here — was Abcde’s great-grandmother a suffragette named Fghij? — why saddle your newborn with a handle that is sure to trigger a lifetime of snickering confusion? Life is hard enough without having to spend the first two minutes of every first encounter saying stuff like “it rhymes with rhapsody” and “my parents love sequences and almost named me 3.1415926535.” What is the upside? That Abcde will always be called first when attendance is taken — unless there’s an Aaron or Aabcde in her class? That by the time she learns to spell her name, she’ll have mastered 19 per cent of the alphabet? I blame celebrity worship for the spike in regrettable baby names this century. In a world of Snookis and Bow Wows, no wonder some parents are desperate to mimic heretical stage naming. These folks wrongly assume a peculiar appellation will give their child a leg up when it’s far more likely to yield a thumbs down. And it’s almost as if the celebrities are trying to corrupt our central name databases with their whimsical absurdity. On Wednesday, during The Tonight Show, Macaulay Culkin told fans they can vote on a new middle name he plans to legally adopt. The short list to replace his current middle name, Carson, includes “Shark Week,” “TheMcRibIsBack” and “Publicity Stunt.” But for noncelebrities, a weird name will not bring publicity: just shame. When Abcde reaches adolescence, I guarantee you she will spend hours pouting in her bedroom, wishing she was an Emma or Julia. By then, the airline incident won’t be remembered as a cruel one-off; it will be the first of many humiliations to come. If you absolutely must give your child an oddball name, at least come up with something on the human spectrum. “Abcde” reads like a shady offshore firm that specializes in tax scams. “Abcde” is a recitation and terrible password. It is not something an innocent child should answer to. While I’m generally against the nanny state, I think we need some new baby-naming regulations. We have rules across the board for child safety, right? You can’t just chuck a phone book into the back of your car. You need an approved car seat. You can’t smack a misbehaving kid like they used to do in the old days. But, what, naming your child *censored* does not qualify as child abuse? Right. Tell that to *censored...*. What some parents don’t realize — and what sociologists ought to study — is the correlation between crime and weird names. I’m not suggesting Abcde will grow up to become an arsonist or an embezzler. But I wouldn’t be surprised. In recent years, here are the names of a few lawbreakers who made the news: Batman bin Suparman, Beezow Doo-Doo Zopittybop-Bop-Bop, Mister Love, Donald Duck, Cherries Waffles Tennis, Obiwan Kenobi and a felon named Fellony. If you name your kid Switchblade, you might as well consider that college fund future bail money. Name your child Night Stalker and prepare to soon sleep with one eye open. Yes, the Southwest flight attendant was wrong to mock a child. Yes, not everyone is nice. And, yes, the world is harsh, judgmental and prone to ridicule. But if you want to reduce the odds your child will be mocked, you probably shouldn’t name her Abcde.

1. Talmud Bavli Bava Metzia 58b (Davidson Edition translation)

כל היורדין לגיהנם עולים חוץ משלשה שירדין ואין עולין ואלו הן הבא על אשת איש והמלכין פני חבריו ברבים והמכנה שם רע לחבירו מכנה היינו מלכין אע"ג דדש ביה בשמיה

Anyone who descends to Gehenna ultimately ascends, except for three who descend and do not ascend, and these are they: One who engages in intercourse with a married woman, as this transgression is a serious offense against both God and a person; and one who humiliates another in public; and one who calls another a derogatory name. The Gemara asks with regard to one who calls another a derogatory name: That is identical to one who shames him; why are they listed separately? The Gemara answers: Although the victim grew accustomed to being called that name in place of his name, and he is no longer humiliated by being called that name, since the intent was to insult him, the perpetrator's punishment is severe.

2. Talmud Bavli Ta'anit 20b (Davidson Edition translation)

מאי הוה עובדיה דרב אדא בר אבהה כי הא דאתמר שאלו תלמידיו (את רבי זירא ואמרי לה) לרב אדא בר אבהה במה הארכת ימים אמר להם... ולא קראתי לחבירי בהכינתו ואמרי לה בהניכתו

What were the exceptional deeds of Rav Adda bar Ahava? The Gemara reports that they are as it is stated: The students of Rabbi Zeira asked him, and some say that the students of Rav Adda bar Ahava asked him: To what do you attribute your longevity? He said to them... In all my days I did not call my colleague by his nickname. And some say that he said: I would not call my colleague by his derogatory family name.

Tosfot ad loc.

בהכינתו. פירוש בכינוי שמכנין אותו בן אדם לגנאי בהניכתו פ' כינוי שם משפחתו שם לוי כמו שם הניכת אבות בגיטין עד עשרה דורות (גיטין דף פח.). כגון רבי אברהם אבן עזרא שכל בני משפחתו היו נקראים כך ודוקא לגנאי אבל לשבח מותר:

Behachinaso – this is the nickname that people call him to embarrass him. Bachanichaso – this is the name that his family is called by (surname), such as the surname of his fathers for the previous ten generations (for a divorce document, see Gitting 88a), for example, Rabbi Avraham "Ibn Ezra", as his entire family were called this. [And the avoidance of calling one by this name] is only to degrade, but to praise, it is permitted.

3. Talmud Bavli Megillah 27b (Davidson Edition translation)

שאלו תלמידיו את רבי זכאי במה הארכת ימים אמר להם מימי לא השתנתי מים בתוך ד"א של תפלה ולא כניתי שם לחבירי...

The Gemara presents the first incident: Rabbi Zakkai was once asked by his disciples: In the merit of which virtue were you blessed with longevity? He said to them: In all my days, I never urinated within four cubits of a place that had been used for prayer. Nor did I ever call my fellow by a nickname...

Tosfot ad loc.

ולא כניתי שם לחבירי - אפילו כינוי דלא הוי גנאי והא דאמרינן (ב"מ דף נח:) דהמכנה שם לחבירו אין לו חלק לעולם הבא היינו בכינוי של פגם משפחה:

I never called my friend by a nickname – even a nickname that is not degrading, and this that we say (Bava Metzia 58b) that he who calls his friend by a nickname has no portion in the world to come, that is a nickname of 'pegam mishpacha'.

4. Rav Zamir Cohen, How Do You Choose A Name For A Newborn?, Hidabroot,

<https://www.hidabroot.org/article/224499>

מספרים שאחד מחסידי האדמו"ר ה"פני מנחם" זצ"ל מגור בא אל רבו וסיפר לו כי החליט לקרוא לבתו התינוקת בשם יענטא על שם סבתו ז"ל. "שאלתי את זוגתי, וגם היא מסכימה לשם זה", סיים החסיד וציפה לאישורו של רבו. אך האדמו"ר הגיב בתמיהה: "ואת התינוקת עצמה שאלתם אם גם היא מסכימה לשם זה?"

They tell the story that one of the Hassidim of the Penei Menachem (Gerrer Rebbe) came to his Rebbe and told him that he had decided to call his infant daughter "Yenta", after his grandmother. "I asked my wife, and she too agrees to name her this", the Hassid concluded, and waited for the permission of the Rebbe. However, the Rebbe responded with wonder: "And did you ask the infant herself if she agrees to this name"?

5. Rabbi Nachum Zev Rosenstein, Nicknaming Friends, Tvunah, <https://tvunah.org/המכנה-שם-להכירו>

יש שכתבו שאסור לכנות את חברו רק בשם גנאי שיש בו איבוד משמעות שמו האמיתי של האדם, כלומר שאין בו שייכות לשמו האמיתי, כיון שרק בכך חבירו מתגנה (מהרי"ק שורש קסב)... ויש סוברים שאף שם גנאי שיוצא ממשמעות שמו האמיתי של האדם, אסור (השואל בתשובת המהרי"ק).

There are those who wrote that it is prohibited to nickname one's friend only with a degrading name that loses the meaning of the original/real name of the person, meaning when it has not relation to the original name, since only through this, his friend is embarrassed... And there are those who understand that even a degrading name that comes from the meaning of a person's real name is prohibited.

6. Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, Peninei Halacha Mishpacha 1:28

אמנם כאשר מדובר בשם משונה, שעלול לגרום לו עגמת נפש כשיגדל, נכון לקובעו כשם שני. ומן הסתם גם הסבא או הסבתא ששמן נעשה עתה מוזר מסכימים לכך, שכן הם רוצים בטובתו של נכדם.

However, when we are dealing with a strange name, that it likely to cause embarrassment when he/she will grow up, it is appropriate to give it as a second name. And most likely, the grandfather or grandmother, whose name is now strange, will agree to this, as they too are looking out for the good of their grandchild.

7. Sefer Metzveh Ve,oseh, Volume 2, Page 158

וכדאי להזכיר מה ששמעתי אומרים בשם מרן הגאון בעל חזון איש זללה"ה, שהיה מזהיר שאין לקרא לתינוק בשם, אפילו ע"ש זקנו וכדומה, אם הוא יודע שהתינוק כשיגדל יתבייש בשם זה, כגון אם הוא שם מוזר שאינו מצוי ויש לחוש שילעגו לו... (וידי"נ אברך חשוב ות"ח מופלג שיש לו קצת שם מוזר אמר לי, שכבר צוה לבניו שלא יקראו לבניהם בשם זה, דעד היום הוא זוכר הבזיונות שהיו לו בקטנותו משם זה).

And it is worth mentioning, that which I heard people saying in the name of the Chazon Ish, Zalalahh, who would warn people that they should not name a child, even after a grandfather etc, if they know that when the child gets older he will be embarrassed from this name, for example, if it is a strange, uncommon name, and we are concerned that others will laugh at him. (And a good friend of mine, a respectable avreich, and great talmid chacham who has a slightly strange name told me that he already told his children that they shouldn't name their children after him, as until today he remembers the embarrassment that he had in his childhood due to this...

8. Ben Ish Chai or Rabbi Yechezkel Kachli, Responsa Torah Lishmah 102

שאלה באחד שאיותה נפשו לקרא שם לבן הנולד לו כשם אות אחת מן כ"ב אותיות אלפא ביתא כגון אל"ף /א/ או בי"ת /ב/ ויש מונעים אותו באומרם לא מצינו כן לא בראשונים ולא באחרונים שיהיו קורין האדם בשם אות מן האותיות אם יש בזה איזה חשש או לאו ואת"ל דאין בזה חשש אם רוצה לקרוא לו שם באות אחת מאותיות שם הוי"ה כגון יו"ד /י/ או וא"ו /ו/ או ה"א /ה/ מאי. יורנו המורה לצדקה ושכמ"ה.

תשובה אין בזה שום חשש ויעשה כאוות נפשו ואין מוחין בידו ואותם המוחין בידו באמרם לא מצינו כזאת טועים הם דהא מצינו בן ה"א /ה/ ה"א /ה/ כנז' במשנה דאבות בן הא אומר לפום צערא אגרא וכן מצינו בגמרא דתענית בחכם אחד ששמו יו"ד וכנז' שם דף כ"ב ע"ב אמר רמי בר רב יו"ד /י/ ופירש"י חכם ששמו יו"ד /י/ הרי אלו הם מאותיות השם ונקראו בהם ועוד כד תידוק תמצא כי שם יהודה אשר בו כל אותיות השם הוא רבועא טפי לכן מעיקרא אין מקום לספק זה כלל. והיה זה שלום ו-ל-ש-י ה' צב-ות יעזור לי. כ"ד הקטן יחזקאל כחלי נר"ו.

Question – there was someone who wanted to call his newborn son by the name of one of the 22 letters in the alphabet, such as “Aleph” or “Beit”, and there were those who were holding him back, saying we have not found that the early ones or late ones would call a person by the name of one of the letters. Is there some concern or not, and if there is not, if he wants to call him one of the letters of Hashem's name – either “Yud”, “Hei” or “Vav”, what is the halacha? Let the teacher judge this case rightfully and his reward will be doubled from the heavens.

Answer – there is no concern at all, and he should do as he wishes, and no one should protest, and those who protest his right, saying “we have not seen this”, are mistaken, for we have found a “Ben Hei Hei”, as mentioned in Mishna Avot – Ben Hei Hei says, according to the pain is the reward – and so we have found in

Masechet Ta'anit, about one sage whose name was "Yud", as mentioned there on page 28b – "Rami the son of Rabbi Yud said" – and Rashi explained that it was a sage whose name was "Yud", and these are from the letters of G-d's name, and they were called by them. Additionally, when you check you will find that the word "Yehudah", which contains all of the letters of G-d's name, is a bigger inclusion, and therefore, there is no reason to even raise such a doubt. And this should be peaceful and may Kel Shakkai Hashem Tzevakos help me. These are my words, the small Yechezkel Kachli, Ner'u.

"York regional police will now release the names of people charged with impaired driving"

-680 News Staff, December 3, 2018

After another weekend of charging more than a dozen drivers with impaired, police in York Region are taking a drastic step in the hopes of curbing this illegal behaviour. Chief Eric Jolliffe said they will now publish the names of drivers charged with impaired-related criminal driving offences. "It's clear that something has to change," Jolliffe said in a statement released on Monday. "Effective immediately, York Regional Police will name all of the drivers charged with impaired-related criminal driving offences, to further make impaired driving socially unacceptable and so that members of our community can assist with notifying police if these offenders choose to drive while under suspension. Innocent lives are put at risk every day by this irresponsible and criminal behaviour. We are not giving up." Going forward, police will post the names of these drivers on the York Regional Police website every Monday. Over the weekend police in York Region laid impaired charges against 16 drivers. The drivers ranged from a 23-year-old Aurora man, who was charged with impaired driving – drug, while the oldest was a 55-year-old man from Newmarket charged with impaired driving – alcohol and over 80. These latest arrests add to the more than 1,400 charges for impaired-related driving offences laid in the region so far this year. Five people were killed in alcohol or drug impairment crashes this year in York Region, police said.

9. Devarim 13:12, 17:13 (Alhatorah.org translation)

וְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁמְעוּ וַיִּירָאוּ וְלֹא־יִוָּסְפוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת כַּדְּבָר הַזֶּה הַרְעָה בְּקִרְבְּךָ:

All Israel shall hear, and fear, and shall not do any more such wickedness as this is in the midst of you.

וְכָל־הָעָם יִשְׁמְעוּ וַיִּירָאוּ וְלֹא יִזְדוֹן עוֹד:

All the people shall hear, and fear, and do no more presumptuously.

וְרַגְמָהוּ כָּל־אֲנָשֵׁי עִירוֹ בְּאֲבָנִים וְמָת וּבָעֵרְתָּ הָרַע מִקִּרְבְּךָ וְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁמְעוּ וַיִּירָאוּ:

All the men of his city shall stone him to death with stones: so you shall put away the evil from the midst of you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear.

10. Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 89a (Davidson Edition translation)

ר' יהודה אומר אין מענין את דינו של זה אלא ממיתין אותו מיד וכותבין ושולחין שלוחין בכל המקומות איש פלוני מתחייב מיתה בבית דין.

Rabbi Yehuda says: One does not delay administering justice to this individual. Rather, the court executes him immediately, and the judges write reports and dispatch agents to all the places, informing them: So-and-so is liable to be punished with the court-imposed death penalty for disobeying the court.

11. Rambam, Hilchot De'ot 6:8 (R' Torczyner translation)

צריך אדם להזהר שלא לבייש חבירו ברבים בין קטן בין גדול, ולא יקרא לו בשם שהוא בוש ממנו, ולא יספר לפניו דבר שהוא בוש ממנו. במה דברים אמורים בדברים שבין אדם לחבירו, אבל בדברי שמים אם לא חזר בו בסתר מכלימין אותו ברבים ומפרסמים חטאו ומחרפים אותו בפניו ומבזין ומקללין אותו עד שיחזור למוטב כמו שעשו כל הנביאים בישראל.

One must be careful not to embarrass another publicly, whether small or great, and not to call him a name that embarrasses him, and not say anything before him that embarrasses him. When is this true? In social matters, but in heavenly matters, if he does not repent after private rebuke then one shames him publicly, publicizing his sin and scorning him to his face, mocking him and cursing him until he returns to a proper path, as the prophets of Israel did.

12. Tsuriel Rashi and Hananel Rosenberg, Shaming in Judaism: Past, Present, Future (Journal of Religion and Society Volume 19, 2017,

<https://dspace2.creighton.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10504/113361/2017-22.pdf>)

Shaming as Communal Pressure: Excommunication (Cherem)

Another form of shaming was used to pressure someone who refused to conform to the community's code of behavior or to bow to the authority of the communal institutions. The most striking of these was undoubtedly cherem (excommunication), which was the public denunciation of a member of the community and his expulsion from the social circle. This punishment was common from ancient times, as there is evidence that it was used among the Dead Sea sects (Weinfeld 1977; 2006). There were two steps in the excommunication process among Jewish communities in the Middle Ages: (1) the announcement of the intent to excommunicate; (2) the act of excommunication itself, which involved declaring that of the person was no longer considered a member of the community and a prohibition on joining with him in prayer, sitting near him, or speaking to him (for further details, see Maimonides, Laws of Talmud Torah 7, 4). Sometimes an excommunication was publicized in the streets of the town and/or in important communities throughout the country (Assaf). Excommunication was rare, and European rabbis resorted to it as seldom as possible. In general, when it was used, it was with the agreement of the community (Assaf: 34). The rabbi would announce the excommunication in the synagogue, taking out the Torah scrolls with a public proclamation of the sin for which the individual was being expelled from the community....

Shaming as Punishment

Like the legal institutions that surrounded it, Jewish communities in the Middle Ages also made use of shaming as a punishment for criminals and sinners. So, for example, those who departed from the straight and narrow of communal norms and were caught in the sin of adultery, drunkenness, theft, or contempt of the communal court were publicly chastised. We find such an instance in the writings of Rabbi Moshe Mintz, the son of Rabbi Isaac HaLevi Mintz (1415–1485), one of the most important rabbis in the Rhineland, who obliged his community to denounce one of its members who had reneged on a monetary undertaking to a fellow Jew in the synagogue toward the end of the prayer service (Responsa Maharam Mintz 101). The objective of public criticism of the sinner is both to punish him and to warn the public that he is not trustworthy. Similar practices were effected through placing the names of members of the community who had sinned on the synagogue notice board. In 1804 the community of Fürth, Germany, placed the following notice on the wall of the women's section of the synagogue: "On this tablet will be listed the names of women who dare to dance with men." Similarly, a notice was posted about sixty years earlier in the city of Grodno, Belarus, on which was written: "Here will be recorded the name of anyone who does not wish to take a poor visitor home for a Sabbath meal" (Assaf: 40). In other communities, such as Zolkiew in the Ukraine, such names were listed in the "Community Register" (Buber: 109). These registers (pinkasim) were public minutes in which were documented important life-cycle events such as births, marriages, deaths, etc., and communal events such as the construction of communal buildings, disasters, epidemics, and pogroms. Sometimes shaming was accompanied by a physical act. For example, the "standing in the corner punishment," in which the sinner was publicly denounced on one of the corners leading to the synagogue, usually the largest synagogue in the town. He was bound to the wall of the synagogue by chains on his hands or around his neck, in full view of the congregants as they came for services and then left. A record can be found in the register of the Jewish community of Cracow, where this punishment was meted out to a member of the community found guilty of stealing money from many of his fellows (Assaf: 133).

Then and Now: The Shaming Dilemma on Social Media...

...using social media for shaming in cases of men refusing to grant a divorce is no longer the action of an individual but has become institutionalized. This breakthrough occurred at the beginning of 2016 as part of legal proceedings of the court of Israel's Chief Rabbinate. There have already been several hearings in the case of Dr. Oded Guez, a physics lecturer living in Israel, who refused to grant his wife a divorce for many years. Following several futile attempts to persuade the husband to divorce his wife, the rabbinical court published a particularly stinging ruling in which it asks the public to apply the "Ordinances of Rabeinu Tam" against him, in effect, to excommunicate and ostracize him:

"It is incumbent on every Jewish man and woman and everyone associated with them not to have any dealings with him, whether in business or monetary matters, not to provide him hospitality, feed him or give him to drink, not to visit him when he is sick, and not to seat him in the synagogue, and all the more so not to call him up to the Torah, and not to let him say kaddish [prayer for the departed], and all the more so not to lead the prayer service, not to ask how he is, not to give him any form of respect or honor until such time as he relents from being stiff necked and listens to the words of the teachers, and grants a divorce in Jewish law to his wife, and to free her from her marital chains."

The rabbinical court did not limit itself to this declaration; it further supported the application of his spouse to publicize his photograph together with the rabbinical court ruling on social media, thereby contravening the original prohibition regarding publicizing Guez's name and picture. According to Pinchas Tannenbaum, spokesman for the chief rabbi,

"The decision was taken with much pain, but there was no other choice. The rabbinical court does not publish advertisements and does not know the word "shaming"; however, in this case the rabbinical judges felt that publicity on social media would be a more effective tool. The wife claimed that from her acquaintance with her husband this was the right tool, and who should know better than her" (Malek-Buda).

...These events have led to disagreements and wide-ranging discussions among rabbis and Jewish intellectuals to map out halakhic rules for the use of shaming in a religious context by both individuals and religious institutions.

David Stav, the rabbi of the town of Shoham and chairman of the Tzohar rabbinical organization, contends that the decision of the rabbinical court to permit public shaming on social media of someone who refuses to grant a divorce is a complex decision:

"The rabbinical court here took a very high risk by applying such a severe punishment, because embarrassing one's fellow in public is a very serious sin, almost like spilling blood, and he has no place in the world to come, and therefore the rabbinical court is obliged to give a convincing explanation as to why it is taking the step of shaming" (Maariv)...

According to Rabbi Cherlow, the starting point for Jewish ethics concerning shaming via social media is not what is "permitted," but rather what is "obligatory": Jewish ethics holds that the concept of "the public's right to know" is a distorted one. The public does not have a right to know everything about people's private lives. Jewish ethics does recognize "the public's right to know," namely, those things that the public must know – it is an obligation to publicize them. It is not always easy to differentiate between the two, yet it is important that this be a guiding light for the one publicizing. In cases of injustice, standing shoulder to shoulder with victims or distributing information that should not be withheld to avoid harming people, there is an obligation to publicize that is incumbent on everyone. However, the risk of using shaming sometimes touches on the laws of life and death. Rabbi Cherlow stresses that "this reminder applies to both sides," namely not just to the one about whom the shaming is publicized. This is true since sometimes an "overdose of harm may lead to actual questions of life and death, and words can kill."