

## **A Wolf By Any Other Name** Jon Papernick - Special To The Jewish Week

As a fiction writer I am intensely aware that names are perhaps the most important words in a story, holding within them the DNA of lives yet to unfold and helping the writer to map out his or her characters' journeys. The entire tone, direction and shape of a story can be determined through well-chosen monikers, as the characters grow into their names like a seed in fertile soil. Imagine if Gatsby had been called Shylock or if Portnoy had been named Heathcliff. Imagine the absurdity of reading Fitzgerald's "The Great Shylock" in 10th-grade English class.

Of course, the most important name of all is that of your child. It is true that Kafka referred to his stories as his children, but here I am speaking about flesh- and-blood children who scream and cry and depend on their parents to set them right on the road of life with a name that will carry them to the heights they deserve.

As amazing as it seems now, Adolf was once not an uncommon handle for Jewish children in certain parts of Europe, and Osama, to most Americans before that day in September was just another foreign name to mispronounce.

So the responsibility weighs heavily on the parent to choose an emblematic name for the newborn child. Part historian, part seer, part linguist, it is our job as parents to fill up the empty vessel with strength, and power and beauty so that we can give our children at least a fighting chance in this world.

There is a scene in the movie "Pulp Fiction" in which a femme fatale cabdriver asks Bruce Willis' character, Butch the pugilist, what his name means. He answers that it doesn't mean anything; it is American, the subtext being that all things American are cut off not only from the rest of the world by two massive oceans, but also from the richness and texture of history.

My wife and I had our first child recently and we decided, for various reasons, to give him an unapologetically Jewish Israeli name. For one, we felt that with all the hatred towards Israel and the rising waves of anti-Semitism in surprising corners of the world it was important to stand up and say, "Hey, I'm Jewish and I've got nothing to hide." Friends and family members wondered whom we were going to name our baby after and hinted that the dearly departed would be offended if they were ignored.

I grew up as an assimilated Jew in Toronto and through my teenage years tried to hide my own Jewishness by lopping my last name in half to form the self-denying "Pape." I don't want my son to go through such angst; I want him to be proud of his name. My wife grew up with an unmistakably Jewish name and has always seen the world through a Jewish lens. She made aliyah in the early '90s and has worked for Jewish organizations ever since. We wanted to choose a name that rooted our son to his heritage, culture and identity, so that he would not be adrift the way I had been for so many years.

We wanted to choose a name that would serve as a metaphor for my son's entire life, a

name that was both fresh and enduring, a name that rang of strength, intelligence, wit, loyalty and honored a way of being, not simply a relative who has passed from this world. A child should be a richly textured encyclopedia with pages yet to fill.

After months of discussion, my wife and I decided to name him Zev (meaning wolf) Judah Papernick, a strong name that to us represented an educated warrior and echoed of great Zionists Ze'ev Jabotinsky and Binyamin Ze'ev Herzl; the poet philosopher Yehuda Halevi; the biblical insurgent Judah Maccabee; the rabbi, scholar and early president of the Hebrew University Judah Magnes; as well as Judah P. Benjamin, the first Jew elected to the U.S. Senate, who, when orally battered by his anti-Semitic colleagues responded coolly, "The gentleman will please remember that when his half-civilized ancestors were hunting the wild boar in the forests of Silesia, mine were the princes of the earth."

We have given our little wolf cub plenty of namesakes to channel and draw strength from with the hopes that he will never feel lost on his journey through life.