

February Ask the Rabbi

Question: Why don't Jews name our children after living relatives?

Answer: Ashkenazi Jews, Jews of European descent, identify names very closely with a person's soul. The name then carries with it personality traits and even the *mazel*, the good or bad fortune, of the soul with which it is identified. In this culture, a child is therefore named for someone who had good attributes and good luck during their long life. However, since the Holocaust, many have been named for those who were martyred because they were Jewish. To name a child for a living relative is tantamount to trying to steal their souls or wishing them dead.

But of course, the answer is not that simple. Sephardic Jews, from Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East, do not hold the same association between a person's name and soul. Their culture is to name their children after living relatives, especially the child's grandparents. Not to name a child after a living relative is seen as a great insult, in some circles, tantamount to wishing them dead.

While these divergent traditions only occasionally cause issues among American Jews, in Israel this poses great challenges. Due in part to the homogenizing effects of the mandatory service in the Israel Defense Force, increasingly Jews of Ashkenazi and Sephardic descent are meeting, falling in love, and marrying. When these couples choose to and are blessed with children, large issues emerge around familial and cultural traditions involved choosing names.