

ACTING LIKE A GROWN-UP

Your guide to making it up as you go along, with Susan Reuben



Beeri or Puah? The choice of a mum's lifetime

SHORTLY AFTER the birth of our third and final baby, I realised to my dismay that a key part of my life was over. I had spent the previous 37 years planning what I was going to call my children – and now I'd used up all my chances.

As a lover of words, I have always been obsessed with names. They seem to me a particularly potent and fascinating area of language. The idea of actually being able to bestow a name on another human being has always struck me as really exciting.

Therefore, if you had asked me at any point from my early childhood what I planned to call my children, I would have been able to answer immediately. (Though it should be said that, until I reached my teens, I would only ever consider girls' names – the idea that I might ever have a boy being completely beyond the pale.)

When it came to planning a family for real, I was so keen to discuss potential names with my husband, Anthony, that he instigated a rule: he wasn't prepared to talk about it unless I was actually pregnant. This seemed unduly harsh – but he was unbending on the subject.

I am always amazed at the many people who don't decide what to call their child until after it's born – and, even then, not always straight away. People often say that they want to meet the baby first and decide what name will suit it. That does make sense to me – except that I'm far too impatient to wait that long to decide.

By the time, I was about halfway through each pregnancy, we had a boy's and a girl's name lined up. It was very much in Anthony's interests that we reach a decision, because it meant that I would finally shut up till the next time.

A few weeks ago, the BBC published a searchable database of baby names. You can enter any name, and it will tell you how many babies it was given to last year. It's a lot of fun to play with.

Obviously, the first thing I did – that anyone does – was to put in the names of myself and my family. It turns out only 21 babies were called Susan in 2016. I found it fascinating that a name that was part of the standard British canon a few decades ago (it was the most popular girls' name of 1964) should have become almost obsolete.

It made me wonder whether names have always gone quickly in and out of vogue. Does the tendency go right back to biblical times? Perhaps, when Joseph's first son

was born, people said to each other: "He's calling him Ephraim? You've got to be kidding. No one's been called that since the 2100s." Or maybe King David said to his wife: "Shall we call the new baby Solomon? It used to be really out of fashion, but I've heard it's coming back in again."

Although it is so common to name children from the Torah or other parts of the Tanach (for our boys, we chose the increasingly popular "Isaac" and the more unusual "Boaz"), it seems to me that a disappointingly small selection of the available names are ever used.

Why is no one called Haggi, Bunni or Mushy, for example? Why do you never meet a Jeezer, a Pispah or a Madmannah? Where are Er and Ner, Uz and Buz, Gog and Magog? Surely these folk deserve to be remembered, too?

Often, of course, the reason is that the characters in question are either extremely minor – they might only be mentioned because they're related to someone more important – or else morally questionable. Cain and Jezebel, for

instance, are uncommon for good reason. Some names have meanings you wouldn't necessarily wish on your child. One of David's wives was called Eglah, meaning "heifer".

Other biblical figures, however, fulfil all the criteria for having people called after them: they are significant, heroic, and their actions have far-reaching effects down the generations. Yet they are ignored, because they don't have decent names.

An example is Puah, one of the midwives who defied Pharaoh's command to kill all the male Hebrew babies. Without her, Moses would not have survived. Another is Hoglah, one of the daughters of Zelophehad who campaigned for the rights of women to inherit property. She was a feminist several thousand years before her time. These two women deserve to be remembered, and yet the modern world is not highly populated with Puahs or Hoglahs.

My husband was particularly fond of Beeri the Hittite as a potential baby name, on the grounds that he sounded like he'd be a good person to have at a party. Luckily, the choice of names for our children wasn't only up to him.

@susanreuben
BBC searchable baby names
database: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-41160596

HISTORY

Secret Jewish treas

ARTEFACTS
REBECCA
ABRAMS

IN THE sleepy market town of Shadova in Lithuania, an hour's drive from Kaunas, or Kovno as it's called in Yiddish, a small statue has recently been erected in the main square. The slight figure of a young girl stands in silent commemoration of the town's Jewish children, who in 1941 were marched out to the nearby forests and murdered en masse by the Nazis and their Lithuanian accomplices.

Long empty roads spider off the town-square out into the countryside beyond, lush in early summer with long grass and studded with wild flowers. The silence is suddenly broken when the doors of the community centre are flung open and an excited crowd of local children pour out into the watery sunshine filling the square. They are all dressed as flowers to celebrate the start of spring.

The children stream in colourful motley past the silent Jewish girl, her presence unnoticed. Even their parents are too young to remember. But, when pressed, a few of the older people do recall the round-up. One old man told an interviewer about a story he'd heard of two boys who'd followed the forced march out to the forest. They'd hidden and watched. As he was telling this story, his granddaughter piped up: "But granddad, you told me, you saw it!" Reluctantly, the old man admitted that, yes, he was actually talking about himself.

Hidden stories seem intrinsic to the Jewish narrative. My great grandmother, Annie Isaacoff, left Lithuania long before the Holocaust, moving to Leeds and then London in the late 19th century, where she met and married her brother's best friend, my great grandfather, Abram Abramovitch.

What happened to those who remained behind was never mentioned in our family stories. It was only in my late twenties that I learnt that many of our Polish relations had been killed during the Second World War.

When I began to research the Jewish objects in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford for my book, *The Jewish Journey*, it was in response to a growing realisation that, here, too, right on my doorstep, there were hidden Jewish lives and untold Jewish stories. With help from fellow members of Oxford Jewish Heritage, I embarked on a quest to find these objects, and two things quickly became clear: first, that the museum contained Jewish artefacts in abundance, and secondly, that they were peculiarly hard to find and, once found, hard to understand, even though they were on display in plain view in the museum's galleries.

The majority of the objects had,



Pissarro's
Vue de ma fenetre,
Eragny.
Below:
Rebecca
Abrams

like Jewish people themselves, come to England from elsewhere and, over time, become thoroughly assimilated into the museum's collections. Their relevance to Jewish history had been obscured. They had become typical representatives of Anglo-Jewry: keeping

their heads down, not drawing attention to themselves. Set within the larger "culture" of the museum itself, they were no longer immediately identifiable as Jewish. And while this helped locate Jewish history in its wider geographical and cultural context, it also ran the risk of erasing, however unintentionally, their specifically Jewish significance.

But who was I to complain? Within five years of arriving in England in 1904, my Romanian great-grandfather had changed his name

from Herman Jaghar to Harry Yager. His son-in-law, my



Objects hidden in plain sight

PHOTOS: ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM



grandfather Maurice Edelman, grew up in Cardiff where he still went by the name of Moses. My childhood was so assimilated, I didn't realise my own name yelled "Jewish" until I got to university and some other Jewish students kindly pointed it out.

I chose to highlight 22 of the Ashmolean's Jewish objects in my book, in homage to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, in continual use for the past 3,000 years, a fitting symbol of the continuity of Jewish experience. The objects, however, speak of diversity as much as continuity.

And what objects! A Bronze Age seal from Lachish, made at the time of the Assyrian conquest of Judah. Stone shekels from Jerusalem from the time of the Babylonian exile. A gold coin minted in 70 CE by the Romans immediately after the destruction of the Second Temple and, in all likelihood, made from

gold looted or melted down during its destruction.

The museum, I also discovered, owned a Dead Sea Scroll jar, purchased back in 1951 but never displayed. The moment when I came face to face with this two-thousand-year-old relic, hidden in the Qumran caves to protect the precious scrolls of the Essene, and hidden a second time in the vaults of the Ashmolean, was a personal highlight. Being allowed to touch with my own hands the jar's patched and mottled surface was absolutely thrilling, a physical connection to the ancient Jewish past. For the first time since it was carefully stowed away, 20 centuries ago, the jar can now be seen on display in the museum.

But the Jewish story doesn't end in 1st-century Judaea, as we know. As Jews moved out into the diaspora, so, too, did the Jewish

artefacts in the Ashmolean. The funeral plaque of a Jewish sausage seller, who lived in Rome in the 5th century, tells an important story of immigration and integration. The plaque is inscribed with a menorah, leaving us in no doubt it was made for a Jew, but the inscription is in Latin, and the dead man's name, Alexander, reminds us that, for most Jews living in the Roman Empire at that time, the lingua franca was Greek.

Most of the 22 objects are unambiguously related to Jews and to Jewish history, but others raise the question: what defines an object as Jewish? I wanted to confront the complexity of that issue by including items that are less directly and obviously connected to Jewishness. Is a viola da gamba made in 17th-century Italy by a Jewish convert to Christianity, strictly speaking Jewish? The answer is probably no, but the story of Jewish musicians in Renaissance Italy led, deliciously, to the crypto-Jewish musicians in the court of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, one of whom may just possibly have been the lover of William Shakespeare.

What and who is a Jew? As the objects in my book come closer to the present day, the issue of Jewish identity becomes increasingly pressing and complex. What makes the objects in the Ashmolean of special value is that they relate to Jewish life in general, as distinct from Judaism the religion. But in some ways this only adds to the complexity. The French Impressionist artist, Camille Pissarro, who came from 10 generations of Portuguese marranos, was determinedly resistant to identifying himself as Jewish, yet it was an identity that was repeatedly thrust upon him, whether he wanted it or not.

His parents' marriage, his own marriage, and his son's marriage all ran into trouble over the question of Jewishness. Towards the end of Pissarro's life, the eruption of the Dreyfus Affair forced him to recognise that Jewish identity is not always freely chosen, an issue as alive today as ever.

While Jews and Judaism are closely connected, they are not and never have been wholly synonymous. Jewish religious culture is relatively well-preserved in museums, libraries and synagogues and archaeological sites around the world, in objects ranging from fragments of ancient mosaic floors, medieval Hebrew manuscripts and Renaissance prayer books to exquisitely embroidered scroll covers, silver finials, ivory pointers, as well as many other ritual and sacred objects.

Antique Torah scrolls are still in daily use in many synagogues, indicative of the Jewish veneration for the past and the continuity of Jewish worship. Many of these sacred objects survived thanks to

A late 16th-century Italian viol da gamba made by Girolamo Amati for the Medici family



Christian scholars and collectors. With supreme irony, the Nazis themselves in some cases helped to preserve Jewish artefacts, which they collected with the intention of showcasing their success in eradicating both the Jewish people and Jewish culture.

Objects related to sacred and ritual Judaism are often distinctive to particular regions and countries, but they remain recognisably connected to a singular religious faith. By contrast, the material remains of daily Jewish life, as represented in snapshot by the 22 objects from the Ashmolean, reflect the incredible diversity of Jewish people, historically as distinct from one another as from other people.

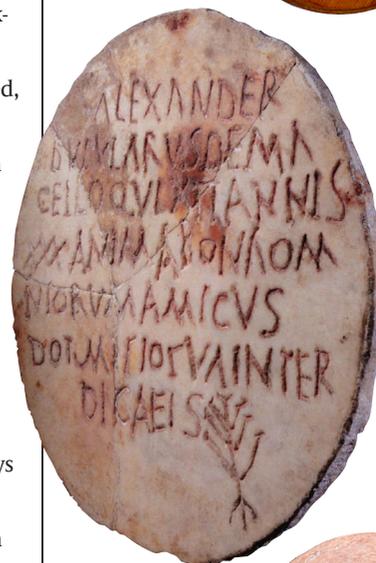
They tell a story that runs against the grain of singularity, pointing instead to what Jews have shared and exchanged with other cultures. For me, an important question threaded through this book is what were Jews doing when they weren't practising Judaism? The answers furnished by the objects highlighted here include cooking, trading, fighting, travelling, falling in love, raising children, making jewellery, playing music, painting, and much else besides.

It was the great Hebrew prophet Isaiah who described the enemies of the ancient Israelites as "tumbleweed". The Assyrians, Isaiah proclaimed, would be driven away "like tumbleweed before a gale". Tumbleweed serves also as a poignant metaphor for Jews themselves, who have been blown about the world by their enemies, "driven like chaff before winds" by persecution and poverty, as well as by the desire to make better and safe lives for themselves and their children. Wheeling through the centuries, gathering influences from other cultures along the way, the Jewish people, if one can even use that phrase, are also and have always been part and parcel of the general chaff of human life.

Time-honoured and deep-seated in Jewish tradition is the idea of each generation succeeding the last in an unending cycle. Even the desire to break with the past, not to be bound by it, a desire felt by my parents and to a lesser extent their own, constitutes a kind of recognition of its weighty and often cumbersome influence.

Around the world to this day the phrase from Psalm 100, "dor vador", from generation to generation, is spoken and sung in synagogues in celebration and reverence for this ancient and ongoing connection between past, present and future, a connection that links Jews, notwithstanding all their differences, from one generation to the next.

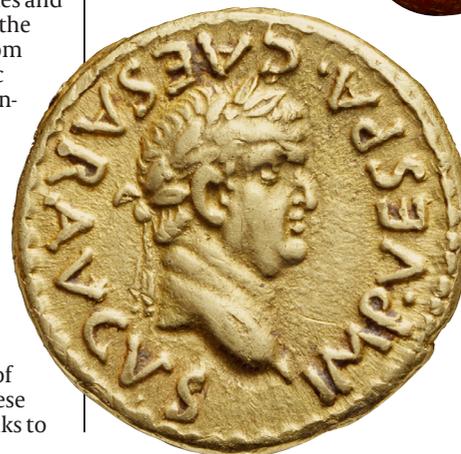
The Jewish Journey: 4000 years in 22 objects from the Ashmolean Museum is published by The Ashmolean (£15)



A memorial plaque to Alexander, a Jewish sausage seller, Rome 400-500 CE. "Good soul, friend of all. You sleep among the just."



Stone shekels. The currency used in the kingdom of Judah in 650-587 BCE



A Roman gold coin from Jerusalem, 70 BCE, dug up in an English field in 1850