Wacky Macky

BY MAXINE SILVERMAN
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My whole life—as a poet, and even before I knew that I would be a poet—I have been fascinated with names. I grew up in a small Missouri town and knew no one else with the name Maxine except a friend of my mother's who had a nervous tic and a chiropractor who owned a pig farm. In the '50's, girls were raised to be "perky," and so my sisters and I used nicknames. My sister Miriam is Mimi and Donna got DeeDee. I was Macky, which meant that the neighbor kids called me Wacky Macky or Mack Truck. Fortunately, John F. Kennedy was elected President and I quickly changed the spelling to Mackie to emulate the First Lady.

I had been told that my middle name Gayle was in memory of my grandfather's favorite sister, but no one told me that great-aunt Golda died in a concentration camp. It wasn't until college that I found out the more precise truth. No one talked about the Shoah at all and, in fact, I never heard my middle name unless my mother was angry. "Maxine Gayle Silverman, come here this minute." How difficult it is to grow into one's (adult) name if it is associated with rage—especially a mother's.

So, I was Mackie until my last year in college when I decided I wanted a Jewish first name. I had been spending time with a number of black artists in St. Louis who were all taking African names. When they asked me what my Hebrew name was, I had nothing to say. The obvious choice would have been to use the Hebrew name I had been given, but my sisters and I were not given Hebrew names since girls, explained our parents, were not called to the Torah in our congregation. At age 20, I named myself: Rachel. I chose it for no other reason than that I liked it. A couple of years later, I reclaimed the name my parents had originally given me and, I guess, when I began to publish at about 24, I began to introduce myself as Maxine.

Later in my 20s, when I was visiting relatives in Canada— actually Golda's daughter, the only member of my grandfather's family to survive the war—someone asked me my Hebrew name. I confessed I had none. My cousin's neighbor explained that his cousin Max was called Meir in Hebrew. And so, one afternoon in Toronto, drinking tea, I became Meira. My voice still trembles with emotion when I state that I am Meira.

In my 30s, I became active in an egalitarian synagogue on Manhattan's Upper West side, and one year, prior to Rosh Hashana, I was informed that I would receive an *aliya.* The rabbi asked for my full Hebrew name, meaning both my parents' names. My father is named Abraham, but my mother, Jeanne, was never given a name in Hebrew (just her two brothers were.) More nervous than angry, I mentioned this fact to several people. One woman murmured in an offhand way, "You could name her yourself." What an astounding reversal of power! To name one's own parent! The mere possibility overwhelmed me and I carried this secret mission with me for a long time, learning more about Jewish culture and myself and my mother along the way—but I still could not bestow a name on her.

Years later, married with two children, I continued writing poetry and began to garden. The act and nomenclature of gardening opened many poems, and one day—as I wrote a poem I understood to be about planting columbines and friendship among women—I named my mother. I was trying to find the Hebrew names for birds I would want in that garden when I came upon Tsufit, a hummingbird, and I was attracted by its delicacy.

These days my mother is failing. When I say *Mishaberah* for her, Tsufit bat Devorah, I feel a tenderness that leaves me shaken. A powerful intimacy flowed from the act of naming her Tsufit, the name I will mourn her by in time.