Uttering the Names of Idols

Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Ids in everyday speech

Most of us do not spend a lot of time discussing idols. Or do we? When talking about manned spacecraft, the name “Apollo” just rolls off our tongues. When discussing brand name footwear, we mention “Nike” without any second thoughts. And of course an old-fashioned glass thermometer is a “mercury thermometer.” However, most of us have forgotten the idolatrous origins of these words: Apollo was the Greek god of the sun, Nike was the Greek god of victory, and Mercury was the Roman god of travel.

Are we halachically allowed to say these names, and if so, under what circumstances?

The prohibition of saying the names of idols

The Bible exhorts a Jew to be careful regarding everything I [G-d] have said to you. The name of the gods of others you shall not mention, nor shall your mouth cause it to be heard (Ex. 23:13). This is traditionally understood to prohibit a Jew from causing the

1. Nachmanides (there) understands that this prohibition is derived from the plain reading of the verse cited, implying that the prohibition of mentioning the name of an idol is Biblically-ordained. However,
name of an idol to be uttered, whether by himself or by others.\(^2\) One practical application of this law is that a Jew may not say, "Meet me next to such-and-such idol."\(^3\) Another corollary is that a Jew may not engage in a business partnership with an idolater, lest the Jew be required to take an oath and swear in the name of the idolater's god.

The Talmud\(^4\) offers two notable exceptions to this prohibition against saying the names of idols. Firstly, one is allowed to utter the names of idols if one does so mockingly.\(^5\) Secondly, one is allowed to utter the names of idols that are explicitly mentioned in the Bible.\(^6\) A number of commentators

Maimonides (Sefer ha-Mitzvot, Negative Commandment #14 and in Laws of Avodah Zarah 5:10) understands that only swearing in the name of an idol is Biblically forbidden, while the prohibition of mentioning an idol's name in other contexts is of Rabbinic origin. This approach is also adopted by Sefer ha-Chinuch (#86) and RabIbag (to Ex. 23:13).

2. R. Yitzchak Luria (1534–1572), better known as Arizal, taught that this prohibition also includes saying any name of the Satan (Samael), including "Diablo" (see Likkutei Torah, Parshat Mishpatim). The author of responsa Torah li-Shmah, ostensibly R. Yosef Chaim of Baghdad (1832–1909), writes (there §426) that he is careful to refer to the archangel by the first two letters of his name, Samech-Mem. R. David Grossman (the voice of the Shaspod) calls him "Sammy."

3. Piskei ha-Rosh (Sanhedrin §7:3) cites an opinion which maintains that this prohibition only applies to using the name of an idol for a utilitarian purpose, but to use the name for no practical reason is permitted. However, Piskei ha-Rosh rejects this view, arguing that mentioning a name of an idol for no real reason is worse than doing so for a practical reason. Piskei ha-Rosh's rejection of that opinion is codified by the author's son in the Tur Yoreh Deah §147 (see also Beit Yosef there) and Shulchan Aruch (there).

4. Sanhedrin 63b.

5. The Talmud (Sotah 42a) says that scoffers are among those who do not merit being greeted by G-d's Holy Presence. Nonetheless, those who mock idolatry are an exception to this rule. Similarly, Maharsha (to Megillah 25b) writes that the notion of "clean language" does not apply to discussions about idolatry, so one may use crude expressions in deriding idols.

6. R. Chaim Benveniste in Shiyairei Kneset ha-Gedolah, Yoreh Deah §147 points out that this dispensation applies even when not said mockingly. The commentators disagree about exactly why the Talmud allows one to say the names of idols mentioned in the Bible.
rule that the same is true when the name of an idol is recorded in the Targum.  

- R. Achai Gaon (d. 752) understood that the Talmud allowed this because once explicit mention of the idol is allowed in one case, it is permitted in all cases (see Gilyonei ha-Shas to Sanhedrin 63b). In other words, since one is certainly allowed to pronounce those names when reading the Torah, then one may also utter those names in other contexts. (S. Mirsky (ed.), Sheiltot de-Rav Achai Gaon vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Yeshiva University/Mossad HaRav Kook, 1962), pg. 136.)

- R. Eliezer of Metz (d. 1175) (Sefer Yeraim, §75 [§245 in other editions]) writes that one is allowed to utter names of idols mentioned in the Bible because if the Bible decided to mention those names, then apparently those idols were already annulled.

- R. Yehonatan Eyebschitz (1690–1764) (Yaarot Dvash (vol. 2, derush #2) writes in the name of the Zohar that the reason that names of idols mentioned in the Bible may be said is that these idols have an element of holiness to them. This stands in contrast to the names of idols not mentioned in the Bible, which are wholly evil as they are the root of all impurity, so uttering their names defiles one’s mouth and tongue.

R. Yair Chaim Bachrach (1639–1702) (Responsa Chavot Yair vol. 1, §1) raises a difficulty with R. Eliezer of Metz’s approach: The reason for allowing one to utter the names of idols mentioned in the Bible cannot be that those idols were already annulled, because that is not always true. For example, Isaiah’s prophecy (Isa. 46:1) foretelling the future downfall of Bel and Nebo (two well-documented Babylonian deities) clearly implies that these deities still existed in Isaiah’s time. Thus one cannot say that if the Bible mentions a deity, it already ceased to be worshipped.

Some suggest splitting R. Eliezer of Metz’s reasoning into two arguments. Accordingly, he means that the names of most idols mentioned in the Bible may be said because by now, they have already been annulled. As for the other idols, which have not yet been nullified, they may nonetheless be uttered for whatever other reason the Bible was allowed to mention them. This answer is proposed by R. Yosef David Zinzheim (1745–1812) in Yad David (to Sanhedrin 63b) and by Shen Chadash to Sefer Yeraim (there).

7. R. Chaim Yosef David Azulai (1724–1806)—the Chida—in Birkei Yosef to Yoreh Deah §147 and Orach Chaim §285, and R. Emmanuel Chai Ricci (1687–1743) in Aderet Eliyahu to Brachot 8b. See the same ruling in Yaarot Dvash (vol. 2, drush #2), Tiferet Yehonatan (to Num. 32:3), and Sefer Maamarei ha-Rama mi-Fanu vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Yismach Lev-Torat Moshe, 2003), pg. 177), cited in Responsa Tov Ayin 18:59.

The proof to this position comes from a question and answer of R. Bachya to Num. 32:3 as to why the Talmud (Brachot 8a-b) singles out a
Names which preceded idolatrous usage

R. Yair Chaim Bachrach (1639–1702) argues that there is another type of idol whose name may be said, even though it is not mentioned in the Bible. That is, if an entity existed before its name became associated with idolatry, then one is allowed to continue using its original name, despite its idolatrous association. He proves this assertion by noting that even though the seven astral forces (i.e., the sun, the moon, and the five closest planets) have historically been used for idol worship, Jews have not stopped using the names of those forces. That is, they continue to say Saturn for Shabtaï, Jupiter for Zedek, and Lucifer (Venus) for Nogah, even though these entities have regretfully become associated with idolatry. He then notes that the seven astral forces are in any case not really idols because the gentiles do not view them as gods, per se, and even those who pray to these forces are only using them as intermediaries, not gods.  

Mentioning obsolete idols

R. Bachrach asks: how can the Talmud say that “Rav and Shmuel did not go to the Temple of Netzrafi”, which was an idol, if it is forbidden to mention the names of idols? He suggests that perhaps the prohibition only applies at the time that a given idol is still being actively worshipped. Once any idol becomes obsolete, one may utter its name—even if it is not mentioned in the Bible.

Nonetheless, he notes that according to this explanation, an

8. Responsa Chavot Yair (vol. 1, §1).
incident in the Talmud becomes difficult to understand. The Amoraic sage Ulla was criticized for mentioning that he had lodged in Kal-Nebo, for Nebo was the name of an idol. One must therefore postulate that Nebo was still worshipped in Ulla’s time because otherwise the Talmud’s criticism would be baseless.

However, this does not seem plausible because the joint downfall of Nebo and Bel is prophesied by Isaiah, and Bel had certainly already been eliminated by the time of Daniel (long before Ulla’s time). One would therefore assume that since Isaiah linked the downfall of Nebo and Bel, if Bel was no longer worshipped, neither was Nebo.\textsuperscript{11} To resolve this, R. Bachrach posits that one must say that even after Daniel eliminated the idols of Bel and Nebo, they were later reinstituted, so that in the generation of Ulla, they were still worshipped.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} R. Bachrach does not reveal his source for the assertion that Daniel eliminated the Babylonian idol Bel. Nonetheless, this idea is found in two early sources: Yanai, an early \textit{payyitan} (poet) who lived in the Holy Land, wrote a poem about different miraculous feats which had historically occurred at night. This poem, popularly recited towards the conclusion of the Passover Seder, mentions the destruction of Bel between mentioning the miraculous destruction of Sennacherib’s army and Daniel miraculously interpreting Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. This placement implies that the idol’s destruction happened in the time of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar. Additionally, \textit{Yossiphon} (Book I, Ch. 3), a Hebrew work loosely based on Josephus’ writings, relates the story of Daniel proving to an unnamed Babylonian king that Bel itself does not eat the sacrifices offered to it, but rather its priests eat those sacrifices and pretend that the idol ate it. The priests of Bel admitted to perpetuating this ploy, prompting the Babylonian king to destroy the Temple of Bel.

\textsuperscript{12} R. Yaakov Emden (1697–1776) in his glosses to \textit{Avodah Zarah} 11b also makes this suggestion about Bel. Archeology suggests that this restoration of the idol happened sooner rather than later, because the Alexander Chronicle (BM 36304) records that Bel-worship existed at the time of King Darius’ downfall (although scholars disagree about whether this refers to King Darius I or Darius II). See A. Hool, \textit{The Challenge of Jewish History} (Mosaica Press, 2014), pgs. 53–54.
Idol names for studying Torah

R. Bachrach also suggests that one is permitted to say the name of an idol for the purposes of discussing and clarifying Torah. He bases himself on a Mishnah,\(^{13}\) which relates a story where Rabban Gamliel justified his use of the bathhouse of Aphrodite [a Greek goddess] based on details specific to that bathhouse (when it became associated with Aphrodite, the fact that it is a bathhouse, etc.). R. Bachrach reasons that the Mishnah deemed it appropriate to mention the name Aphrodite—and did not just mention an “idol” in a vague way—because mentioning the names of idols is permitted for the purposes of clarifying the details of Torah and halacha.\(^{14}\) The same idea is proposed by the fourteenth-century authority R. Menachem ha-Meiri (1249–1310),\(^{15}\) who allows for mentioning names of idols which are not in the Bible if needed in order to learn and rule halachic matters. He cites, as an example, the case of the Roman god Marclus (Mercury), which is consistently mentioned by name in Rabbinic literature, even though it does not appear in the Bible.\(^{16}\)

However, this allowance is not universally agreed upon. Rabbeinu Tam (1100–1171), writes in his explanation of the etymology of the name Marclus that the name itself speaks disparagingly of the idol and is not its real name.\(^{17}\) Consequently, when R. Chaim Benveniste (1603–1673) compares the explanation of Rabbeinu Tam with that of ha-

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14. *Responsa Chavot Yair* (vol. 1, §1).
15. *Beit ha-Bechirah* to *Sanhedrin* 63b.
16. See commentary of R. Avraham Sofer (1897–1982) to ha-Meiri, and see also *Aruch ha-Ner* to *Sanhedrin* 63b.
17. *Tosafot* to *Sanhedrin* 64a and *Avodah Zarah* 50a. [For more on this, see *Maharam* (to *Sanhedrin* 64a) and Maharshai’s commentary to *Smag* (Negative Commandment #32) with R. Benveniste’s commentary there (*Chamra de-Chayeit to Smag*).] See a similar approach by R. Isaiah of Trani (1180–1250) in *Piskei Rid* (to *Sanhedrin* 63b).
Meiri, he explains that R. Tam’s engaging in onomastics shows that he disagrees with ha-Meiri’s approach.  

It is noteworthy that recently discovered Medieval sources set up Rabbeinu Tam’s statement in a manner which supports the notion that Rabbeinu Tam himself actually agreed with ha-Meiri.

The Rabbis corrupted the names of idols

The Talmud offers a list of “permanent places of daily idolatry”: the Temple of Bel in Babylon, the Temple of Nebo in Kursi, Tar’ata in Mapug, Zerifa in Ashkelon, and Nishtra in Arabia. The Tosafist R. Yehuda b. Klonymous takes issue with this delineation of idolatrous names and asks how the Talmud could mention them if they are not found in the Bible (save for Bel and Nebo). He answers that the Talmud slightly altered their names in order to present these idols in a disparaging way. For example, the name Tar’ata conjures the

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18. Shiyarei Knesset ha-Gedolah, Yoreh Deah §147, also cited by Darkei Teshuvah (there).

Another commentator (Parashat ha-Kesef to Maimonides’ Laws of Avodah Zarah 5:10) suggests conflicting proofs to the two opinions noted in the text, from the Talmud in Avodah Zara 11b (which lists idols not mentioned in the Bible), and the Talmud in Sanhedrin 63b, which finds it problematic that a Tannaitic source refers to a specific idol by name even though that was done in a halachic context.


21. See Harkavy (ed.), Zichron la-Rishonim ve-gam la-Acharonim vol. 1, pg. 22 (Petersburg, 1879), for a Geonic responsum that discusses the somewhat-related issue of which ancient Persian holidays mentioned by the Talmud (there) were still practiced.
word ‘arai (אורי, temporary), alluding to the “temporary existence” of this idol until its eventual downfall. The god Nishtra was spelled nishra, conjuring the word neshira (נשריה, falling/balding).22

Similarly, the Mishnah offers a list of pagan holidays celebrated in Roman times and includes in that list a holiday known as Saturnura (סרקונורה).23 R. Yisrael Lipschitz (1782–1860) points out that the real name of this winter holiday was Saturnalia, the day which celebrates the astral force Shabtai (known in Latin as Saturn).24 R. Lipschitz explains that the Rabbis purposely distorted the word Saturnalia in order to avoid the issue of explicitly using the name of an idol. They referred to it as Saturnura, which is a portmanteau of satar (סתר, far away) and nura (נרה, fire), a reference to the Earth’s distance from the sun during the winter period.25 (In some ways, this follows R. Lipschitz’s general approach of explaining that while the Hebrew language does incorporate some elements of foreign languages, the Rabbis insured that it would not do so verbatim, but would slightly alter the meaning and/or pronunciation of adopted foreign words.26)


23. Avodah Zarah 1:3.

24. The Italian scholar R. Chananiah Elchanan Chai Cohen (1750–1834) in Bamot Baal (Reggio, 1809), pg. 36a, answers this discrepancy differently. He posits that for some reason when transliterating the name of the Roman holiday from Latin to Hebrew, the l-sound of the word saturnalia switched to an r-sound to produce saturnura. He notes that the inverse phenomenon is found in the name of the Roman god Mercury in which the second r-sound was switched into an l-sound in Hebrew to produce the name Marculus. Indeed, Egyptologists also see the interchangeability of these two sounds in the Ancient Egyptian language. Linguists recognize that both the r-sound and the l-sound are considered “liquid” and are therefore somewhat interchangeable.

25. Tiferet Yisrael to Avodah Zarah 1:3, Yachin §8.

A third instance of this phenomenon is found where the Talmud\textsuperscript{27} mentions an Egyptian deity named \textit{Sar-apis} (ע apis). The Talmud explains that this god is named after the Biblical Joseph, who was \textit{sar u-mefis} (שם מזיף, he disappeared and [then ended up] sustaining [the entire world during the years of famine]). R. Yaakov Emden (1697–1776) notes that in this case, the Talmud purposely split the god’s name Serapis into two words in order to disparage it. That is, the Talmud’s spelling of the Egyptian deity’s name is orthographically similar to \textit{Sar efes} (שם עフリー, which literally means “prince of nothing.”\textsuperscript{28}

\section*{Using idol names in everyday life}

R. Yitzchok Schmelkes of Lvov (1828–1905) discusses using the names of idols in everyday correspondence. He rules that it is unbefitting of the local \textit{Bikur Cholim} chapter (an aid group which visits the sick and infirm) to bear the name Gaia, because Gaia was the name of a Greek goddess responsible for health. He notes that even though it seems that this idol has already been rendered obsolete, the possibility still exists that somewhere, someone believes in it. He also denounces using the Yiddish phrase \textit{gesundheit} because the German word \textit{gesund} (health) recalls the name of the Greek goddess Gaia, regardless of whether or not the German word preceded the establishment of the Greek pantheon. He then notes that even though the Hebrew word \textit{mammon} (?>>$\text{\textdollar}$, money) was derived from the pagan god of silver,\textsuperscript{29} its usage as the term for money is somehow not connected to that god in any way, while the

\textsuperscript{27} Avodah Zarah 43a.

\textsuperscript{28} Hagahot Yaavetz to Avodah Zarah 43a.

\textsuperscript{29} I have not found any source for this assertion. R. Reuven Margolis in \textit{Mekor Chesed} to \textit{Sefer Chassidim} §427 points out that the Midrash (\textit{Bamidbar Rabbah} §22:8) offers another explanation of the Hebrew word \textit{mammon}: It is an abbreviation of the phrase \textit{meh atah moneh kelum} (מה אתה מונה לך), what are you counting—nothing).
German word for health is, in fact, directly related to the Gaia.\(^{30}\)

*Maharal* (1512–1609) writes that it is forbidden to mention certain well-known coins which were named after idols.\(^{31}\)

### Writing names of idols

R. Yosef Babad (1801–1874) writes that he is unsure about whether or not the prohibition of *saying* the names of idols also applies to *writing* them.\(^{32}\) After discussing the matter, R. Schmelkes effectively rules that there is no prohibition to write the names of idols, a view upheld by R. Ezriel Hildesheimer (1820–1899), as well.\(^{33}\) However, R. Schmelkes adds the caveat that one who wrote about an idol, “this is my god” has violated a capital prohibition in the same way as one who says those words.\(^{34}\)

R. Menashe Klein (1924–2011) quotes these sources to allow writing the addresses of streets and towns named after idols. He further justifies his position by noting that according to R. Eliezer of Metz, one is allowed to say the name of any idol that is obsolete. Accordingly, since streets and towns\(^{35}\) are usually

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32. *Minchat Chinuch*, §86.
33. *Responsa Rabbi Ezriel* (*Yoreh Deah* §180).
34. *Responsa Beit Yitzchak*, *Yoreh Deah* vol. 1, §152.
35. R. Chaim Halberstam of Sanz (1793–1876) is reputed to have refrained from pronouncing the given names of cities because he suspected that they contained allusions to idolatry. Instead he would purposely mispronounce the name of the city or use some other way of identifying the city besides its name. Nonetheless, R. Meir Amsel dismisses the story about R. Chaim Sanzer as an unsourced rumor and points to several halachic responsa where R. Chaim Sanzer himself uses the gentile names of cities. See *Responsa Hamaor* (New York, 1967), vol. 1, pp. 493–494 and *ha-Ish ha-Domeh le-Malach* (Bene Barak, 2002), p. 62. Similarly, the town known in Hungarian as Szatmárnéméti and in Romanian as Satu Mare was historically known amongst Jews as Sakmar/Sakmir. In fact, its own rabbis such as R. Yoel
named after obsolete forms of idolatry, there is generally no problem. Nonetheless, R. Klein concludes that, if possible, one should try to avoid directly writing the name of an idol when writing out a city or street name, and should instead purposely misspell the idolatrous name.36

Places named after idols

R. Moshe Sternbuch tolerates uttering the names of idols in situations that most people do not realize those names are actually of idolatrous origins. R. Sternbuch applies this reasoning to justify, for example, using the secular names for months which are named after idols (see below). He also uses this to permit saying the name of the Indian city Bombay, even though it is named after an idol. Regarding Bombay, R. Sternbuch also notes that the actual Indian goddess for whom the city is named was Mumbai and when the British occupied India, they changed the name of the city from Mumbai to Bombay,37 thereby showing their disregard for the theistic implications of its name. Once this occurred, the name of the city can no longer be said to be associated with that idol.38

In discussing streets named after idols, R. Efrayim Greenblatt (1932–2014) notes that nowadays those streets only refer to the idols in name, but do not actually conjure their

Teitelbaum of Satmar referred to the town as such. The phenomenon was likely due to an urban legend which argued that Satu Mare refers to “Saint Mary”. Nonetheless, others point out that the name Satu Mare simply means “large city” in Romanian.

36. Responsa Mishneh Halachot vol. 9, §169.

37. When asked by my colleague R. Dovi Leibowitz of Givat Zev HaChadashah about the 1995 legislation in India that restored the name Mumbai to the city, R. Sternbuch responded that even so, people still continue to call the city Bombay, so his ruling remains. Furthermore, noted R. Sternbuch, even if the name Mumbai catches on, since most people do not realize that it is the name of an idol, it is still permitted to be mentioned.

38. Responsa Teshuvot ve-Hanhagot vol. 6, Yoreh Deah §178.
memory. Nonetheless, he writes that when one needs to mention the name of an idol when writing the address for a mail item, one should optimally abbreviate the idol’s name, instead of writing it out in full. R. Greenblatt also notes that in 1951, R. Moshe Feinstein (1895–1986) told him that, if possible, one should refrain from verbally mentioning street names that refer to idols (similar to R. Klein’s ruling), but if it cannot be avoided, one should express the name in a way that it is clear that he conveys no religious significance to the idol. When all is said and done, R. Greenblatt concludes that while some people are stringent in this matter, the norm is to be lenient.39

The late R. Avraham Weinfeld argues that places named after idols are allowed to be mentioned provided the idol itself is not located in that place. Nonetheless, if the place actually houses the idol for which it is named, uttering the place’s name would be forbidden.40

Names of idols in dates

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<th>Seven Days of the Week and the Astral Forces</th>
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<td>Days of the week:</td>
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There are several complicated issues that arise when referring to dates by the conventional Western system. The names of some components used in this system allude to elements of idolatry, leading to the possibility that a Jew is forbidden from using such a dating system:

1. **Years:** The secular calendar supposedly begins counting its years from the birth of the Christian deity Jesus. By using that date as one’s point of reference, one lends significance to that religion, which may be forbidden. Nonetheless, after discussing the matter at great length, R. Ovadia Yosef (1918–2013) allows using the secular year in private letters. Interestingly, he proves that in any case, the year 1 CE was not actually the year of Jesus’ birth. Some authorities mention that if one wants to be especially stringent, he can use the Christian year in correspondence, but should note that such is the year “according to their calculation” to exclude himself from giving any significance to the Christian counting. Alternatively, if one omits the millennium and only counts the century and the year in the century (e.g. if in the year 1987 he simply writes 987), he is in the clear because he has sufficiently deviated from the Christian nomenclature. Nonetheless, R.

41. Responsa Yabia Omer vol. 3 Yoreh Deah §9 and vol. 7 Yoreh Deah §32.
Meir Amsel (1907–2007) proves from various rabbinic responsa that all of this is unnecessary.  

2. **Months**: The names of the first six months of the conventional calendar are derived from names of Greek and Roman gods (January=Janus, February=Februus, March=Mars, April=Aphrodite, May=Maia, June=Juno). Nonetheless, R. Sternbuch rules that this does not cause a problem in using those names, because since people do not realize their idolatrous origins, they may be uttered. Another complicating factor is that using the numbers of the secular months (1 for January, 2 for February, 3 for March, et al.) may be considered a violation of the Biblical directive (Ex. 12:2) that Nissan should always be considered the first month.  

3. **Days of the week**: The conventional names for the days of the week are related to the idolatrous names of the seven astral forces. In English and German, most of those names are related to Norse gods, while in other Latin-based Romance languages (such as Spanish, French, and Italian) the days are named after Roman gods. This raises an issue with using those names because they speak of idols. Furthermore, halacha calls for connecting the days of the week to the Sabbath: The fourth of the Ten Commandments commands the Jews to **Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it...** (Ex. 20:8). Mechilta de-Rashbi explains that this commandment entails remembering the Sabbath during the rest of the week by naming each day of the week as a function of the days elapsed since the previous Sabbath. Thus, Sunday is “the first day,” Monday is “the second day,” and so forth (see footnote).  

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43. Respona Teshuvot ve-Hanhagot vol. 6, Yoreh Deah §178.  
44. See R. Yaakov Yerucham Warschner’s Seder Yaakov vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 2010), pgs. 373–375 who offers a survey of the various opinions on this matter.  
45. Interestingly, Portuguese is the only Romance language in which the days of the week (except Saturday and Sunday) are named ordinarily, not nominally (see below).  
46. Mechilta de-Rabbi Yishmael (there) simply quotes the Tannaitic sage Rav
R. Yehuda Herzl Henkin\textsuperscript{47} rules that one is permitted to say the names of foreign deities which are no longer worshipped

Yitzchak who said, "you should not count in the way that others count; rather you should count for the sake of the Sabbath." Nachmanides (to Ex. 20:8) and Ritva (to Rosh HaShanah 3a) explain that this means that the days of the week should not be given nominally, but rather ordinarily in relation to how many days passed since the previous Sabbath. Their explanation bridges the statements of Mechilta de-Rabbi Yishmael and Mechilta de-Rashbi.

R. Yosef Elbo (1380–1444) in Sefer ha-Ikkarim (9:33) quotes Nachmanides and adds that this means that one should not use the names Lunis, Martis, Marculus (the respective Spanish words for Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday) to refer to the days of the week. R. Yosef Teomim (1727–1792), better known as the Pri Megadim, in Sefer Notrikon (Bilguriya, 1910), pg. 10 also quotes Nachmanides and adds that this means that one should not use the German/Yiddish names Sonntag (Sunday), Montag (Monday), et al., for the days of the week.

This begs the question: How can the Jewish community at large use the names for the days of the week in their respective languages, if they really should name the days of the week in the above manner? R. Baruch Epstein (1860–1941) writes in Baruch she-Amar Al Haggada Shel Pesach (Tel Aviv, 1965), pg. 84 that because of the bitter exile, Jews have become caught in the general custom of giving pagan names for each day of the week. He notes that they retain the Jewish custom of dating days of the week to the Sabbath in religious documents such as Gittin (ritual bills of divorce) and Ketubot (marriage documents). Thus, while R. Epstein raises the issue, he fails to offer an adequate solution, instead attributing the phenomenon post facto to outside causes.

An answer is proposed by both R. Yoel Teitelbaum (1887–1979) in Responsa Divrei Yoel (vol. 1 §15) and R. Menachem Kashur (Torah Shleimah vol. 11, pg. 181). They explain that Mechilta's requirement to correlate the names of the days of the week to the Sabbath does not require one to always refer to the days of the week vis-à-vis the previous Sabbath. That is, if one mentions the day of the week as it relates to the Sabbath once a day, he has already fulfilled the requirement of the Mechilta and this allows him to continue referring to that day in other ways. In the daily liturgy, the Song of the Day is prefaced with an introduction, "Today is the xth day of the week and on it, the Levites would sing in the Holy Temple..." Simply reciting this declaration allows one to fulfill the Mechilta's obligation, permitting him to use other means of referring to the day afterwards. [This does not entirely solve the problem according to those who follow the custom of the Vilna Gaon who recited different Psalms on special days because those Psalms are not prefaced with a declaration mentioning the day of the week.]

\textsuperscript{47} Responsa Bnei Banim vol. 3 §35.
nowadays because once the deity is no longer worshipped, its name can no longer be said to be a name of idolatry. Furthermore, he argues that the Torah only forbids uttering the name of a foreign god *per se* but does not prohibit uttering the names of places or the like which are *named after* foreign gods. With this in mind, he justifies using the names of Norse gods in the days of the week. However, he too notes that if the idol in question is located inside the city which bears its name, then uttering the city’s name is forbidden.

Interestingly, while the consensus seems to permit using secular dates, R. Ovadia Yosef clearly writes that his lenient ruling does not allow for using secular dates on Jewish tombstones.48

**Conclusion**

In short, there are several common cases in which the *Poskim* allow for one to verbalize the names of idols. The first two cases—speaking of an idol disparagingly or saying a name mentioned in the Bible—are explicitly mentioned in the Talmud. As a corollary of the second case, many *Poskim* also allow for saying the names of idols mentioned in the Targumim, even if they are not mentioned explicitly in the Bible.

Some sources see a dispute between R. Tam and ha-Meiri about whether one is allowed to mention the names of idols not found in the Bible when doing so in the context of Torah study, with ha-Meiri ruling in the affirmative and R. Tam disagreeing. However, there is evidence that points to the contention that R. Tam himself actually agrees to ha-Meiri’s lenient ruling—as long as the idolatrous name is not overly flattering of the deity.

Another leniency is that it is permissible to say the names of

idols which are no longer worshipped or to say their names in contexts outside of their existence as deities (i.e. things which are named after those gods). In practice, contemporary *Poskim* generally adopt lenient positions when the names of idols appear as street names, city names, and in other everyday uses. The consensus is to rule even more leniently when the matter concerns merely *writing* names of idols, as opposed to actually *saying* them.