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Adoption

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A Conspicuous Family

By Gina Hagler

We are often referred to as a "conspicuous family." Sometimes we're described as "diverse." We like to think of ourselves as "wonderful." Any way you term it, we are a Jewish family with a biological son and an adopted son and daughter. Since the children who joined us through adoption are of Korean descent, people notice when we walk into a temple.

Before we adopted, we gave considerable thought to what it would be like for Asian children to be raised as Jews. Our primary concern was whether or not they would be accepted in the Jewish community. Since we were interfaith at the time and not exactly enjoying a stellar reception as it was, we got past that worry quickly enough. And we'd read about the growing number of Jewish families adopting Asian kids even if we didn't know any from personal experience. We weren't quite sure of the specifics of how best to meet our family's needs as a "conspicuous family" who happened to be Jewish, but we decided to go ahead and adopt.



Looking back over the past 10 years, the day-to-day raising of our kids as Jews has been easy because much of our observance is home-based. Lighting candles on Shabbat and incorporating tashlich (sprinkling crumbs into a moving body of water to symbolize casting away the things you regret as you look forward to the coming year) into our Rosh Hashanah observance doesn't depend on being members of a congregation. Our kids know all about the holidays and observances from what we share with them. They self-identify as Jews.

But we wanted our children to observe Judaism within the embrace of a community. Finding the right community, however, took some work. The temple we belonged to at the time we were adopting was welcoming enough. The rabbi and staff made no distinction between our adopted children and our biological son. Some of the staff even had or knew of people with internationally, transracially adopted children. As our children were ready to enter nursery school, we felt a bit less comfortable. It was our fellow congregants who quickly pointed out that the little Chinese girl who was also a member of the congregation would be the perfect future bride for our adopted son. There was nothing exactly wrong with that, but it wasn't quite right, either. It was time for a change.

Feeling a bit like Goldilocks, I explored other congregations. Some had a more diverse membership, but their practice of Judaism was not as clearly defined as I wanted. Some had the

Judaism component just right, but no other transracial families. Where was the congregation with those Jewish adoptive families I'd read about?

We finally found it two years ago. It's not close by, but it is a warm, welcoming congregation, firmly rooted in Judaism. There are lots of "conspicuous families" who all happen to be raising their children as Jews. We see many families who look like ours. We find many families who share our concerns and celebrate our differences. This has been a positive experience for my Asian children, as well as for our biological son. It means a great deal to all of us to see lots of different types of families when we participate in the congregational Shabbat (Sabbath) dinners and tashlich observances. In fact, seeing families that look like ours may not ultimately have been as important as being in a place where all the families are not alike--no matter in what manner. A bonus is that we've found other families from our area who also bypass closer congregations because while not themselves adoptive families, they've sought out a more diverse congregation as a model for their own children.

I asked our younger kids what they thought of being in a congregation with a lot of other kids who are also adopted. They said it was great because they didn't have to explain over and over again why they didn't look like their mom and dad--everybody already knows. For our older son, it's been just as meaningful because he doesn't feel the awkwardness of well-intentioned people searching the room for his siblings. Where we are now, the possibility that his brother and sister are a different race than his exists clearly at the front of everyone's consciousness.

For my husband and me, belonging to a congregation with other families like ours puts into action our words about diversity. It also fits what we tell them about Judaism being about what you believe and how you live your life, rather than how you look. If we did not live in an area with such a congregation, we would be more involved in something like [Stars of David](#), a non-profit organization dedicated to the celebration and support of adoptive Jewish families. We've seen firsthand that it makes a tremendous difference to be in a place where we are *just another family*.

Ideally, our children would have more role models of Asian Jews but we're confident this generation of Jews, with so many transracially adopted children, is going to be the generation that grows these future Asian rabbis and cantors. For now it's enough for our children that their peers reflect them and our congregation makes them truly welcome.



Gina Hagler is a freelance writer living in the Maryland suburbs with her husband and three children. Her work has appeared in *Adoptive Families* and *Adoption TODAY*. You can see more of her work at www.GinaHagler.com.

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International Adoption and Interfaith Families

By Vicki Peterson

The Saturday before Thanksgiving is now widely recognized as National Adoption Day. In some parts of our country it is been expanded to a week or the whole month of November. It focuses attention on a wonderful way to bring a child into the family and the fact that 60% of all Americans now have a personal connection to adoption.

The world of adoptions has changed significantly from the time when people attempted to make adoption less transparent and therefore, "not a problem." Over the past two decades we have come to understand that secrecy regarding adoption actually creates significant problems for all involved. Today, the whole extended family, close friends and even co-workers are often involved in welcoming and celebrating the arrival of a newly adopted child. Parents are now encouraged to talk to their children about adoption from an early age so that there are no secrets. Many parents now annually celebrate the day their child came into the family in the same way that a birthday is recognized as a special day.



Max Stevens, adopted from Korea, is a member of a Jewish fraternity at college.

important themes emerge.

Virtually any adopting Jewish parent will raise a child who was not born Jewish. It is extraordinarily rare for a Jewish child to be relinquished for adoption. Like more than 24,000 other Americans, Jewish prospective parents often turn to international adoption as a means of building or adding to their family. At one time this was an unusual concept, but no longer.

Adoptive parents feel that it is the ties of love that make a family, not the ties of blood. In addition to love, successful adoptive parents give much thought to sensitively guiding their child and dealing with issues of difference. Thoughtful decisions and unconditional commitment are two common features of skilled parenting. Although there is not one right way to do it,

Adoption professionals encourage parents who adopt internationally to involve their children in cultural awareness programs by the time a child is 5 or 6 so that comfort and pride in that heritage

will be internalized early and will be a positive part of his or her identity.

This is what Evan Hershenson and his wife Lisa, both of whom are heavily involved in Jewish life, try to do while raising their two Chinese daughters. Evan tutors and teaches Jewish education while Lisa is a cantor. Whenever possible they bring both Jewish life and Chinese culture into their home. The family attends Chinese cultural events specially designed for children adopted from China. Recently, their 6- and 3-year-old daughters were converted at a mikvah followed by a naming ceremony. They know many other Jewish families with Chinese children and not long ago attended the Bat Mitzvah of a Chinese adoptee.

When their Korean children were young, Laura Stevens worried about both their racial and Jewish minority status. She encouraged them to have friends from various Asian backgrounds so they would feel comfortable with their racial identity. At the same time, they attended Sunday school and temple services. Now grown, Laura says that her young adult children see themselves as being "Jewish, American *and* Korean." Her son, Max, attends a college which does not have a large minority population. Max joined a Jewish fraternity because it is where he is most comfortable.



Like his big brother Caleb (left), Michael, who was born in Guatemala, will attend Hebrew school in a few years.

Leah Bloom, 24, is a Korean adoptee who describes how she sees herself this way: "On the outside I look Asian, but inside I feel Jewish." Raised in an observant home, she regularly attended a Conservative synagogue. She wants to keep the values she learned growing up and someday hopes to marry and raise her children Jewish, but she knows there is a challenge ahead because her preference is to date Asian men. In her experience, Caucasian men treat her as if she is "exotic" rather than who she feels she really is. She is confident that she will find a way to deal with the identity issues ahead. Thoughtful and well grounded, she leads a busy life and is about to start graduate school.

In addition to instilling pride in their birth culture, adoptive parents want to instill values in their children.



Boston Globe columnist Jeff Jacoby is Jewish while his wife Laura grew up in a Protestant home attending church regularly. She converted to Judaism while dating Jeff. Now married for more than 10 years, they are raising one biological child and one adopted from Guatemala. Religion is a cornerstone in their family life. They keep a kosher home and strictly observe the Sabbath. They have discovered adopted children of all nationalities in their community and at their synagogue. Their 3-year-old son, Micah, knows that his dad is from Ohio, his mom is from New York, his 9-year-old

Tim Cavicchi (right), a non-Jew, and his Jewish wife raise their children as Jews, including their 3-year-old Korean daughter.

brother was born in Boston and he was born in Guatemala. Like big brother Caleb, in a few years Micah will attend a Jewish parochial school.

Although not Jewish like

his wife, Tim Cavicchi says that before they got married, he and his wife talked about how they would raise children. They felt that it was important for children to have a religion when growing up rather than be expected to choose one as an adult and possibly "end up with nothing." For them, Judaism was more symbolic of things they most valued, like a close family life. So, even though he does not practice a religion himself, Tim regularly drives his sons to Hebrew school and feels good about the commitment they have made to raise them and their 3-year-old Korean sister in the Jewish faith.



Raised by a Christian mother and Jewish father who were both low-key in terms of religious practice, Jenny Rothenberg (bottom left) is an adult Asian adoptee who says that her parents emphasized "humanity, giving back to the community and being a good person."

Raised by a Christian mother and Jewish father who were both low-key in terms of religious practice, Jenny Rothenberg is an adult Asian adoptee who says that her parents emphasized "humanity, giving back to the community and being a good person." Adopted at 5, she has always felt comfortable about her background.

Neither religion nor adoption has been a focal point of her life. She hasn't had any negative experiences and feels that it is her actions that matter, not her background: "I can't imagine growing up with any other set of parents," she says. "They dried my tears, guided me and made me who I am today."

Adopted or biological, this is the kind of tribute all parents hope to have some day from the child that they have raised. Creating a family through the magical process of adoption is certainly worth celebrating.



Vicki Peterson has five grown children, including two Korean-born daughters. Since 1979, she has been affiliated with [Wide Horizons For Children](http://www.widehorizonsforchildren.org) ((800) 729-5330), a private, non-profit adoption agency headquartered near Boston that has placed more than 9,000 children from more than 50 countries with U.S. families. Formerly CEO and now executive director of external affairs, Peterson is the voice of the organization, representing the agency's mission and many achievements to the public.

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Pizza, Noodles and Latkes

By Hedi Molnar

What am I? Small eyes ... dark hair ... I look like my father. When I went to China to adopt each of our daughters, many of the grandpas I saw looked so much like my Dad. It's our Hungarian ancestry that makes us look a bit Asian.

My husband is ever so Italian and a Roman Catholic, but we're both born and raised in New York City. Our geographic heritage (and my New Yawk accent) often sets us apart from other Americans.

While my husband has several generations in his family who were Americans, my parents were Holocaust survivors and I was born in the U.S. after World War II.



Our two daughters: One born in the north of China and the other in the south, are beautiful (of course, I'm their mom and totally objective) and look quite different from each other.

This is our multicultural/multi-religioned family. Oh, how to stir this diversity-filled pot?

For years and years we participated in interfaith discussion groups and along the way learned from a social worker, who has great sensitivity about interfaith families, that if you and your spouse are comfortable with your choices, your children will receive a positive message about your family's religious and cultural observances.

I am a Jew. Honoring my ancestors, all of whom suffered or died in the Holocaust, was one reason we decided to have a Jewish family. I have found a religious home in Reform

Judaism and am drawn to being a practicing Jew in a temple that encourages discussing and questioning tenets of our religion.

Friday evenings our usual Shabbat (Sabbath) dinner is pizza, one plain and one with eggplant. This tradition is from my husband's Italian-American family. We all love pizza--who doesn't--and look forward to the relaxed Shabbat meal which doesn't require preparation. Sometimes we add challah (egg bread) to the table and a kiddush (wine) cup and light Shabbat candles, too.

I have attended many Shabbat services with my 11-year old daughter, Rachel. This is a special time for us to pray together and to sing the melodies of the Jewish people. My younger daughter attends a Jewish preschool, sings Shabbat songs and celebrates religious holidays at school. I try to attend the monthly Tot Shabbat at our temple, too.

And, I have made a Jewish home for our daughters. The images (candles burning bright), the sounds (songs, shofar [ram's horn]), the tastes (latkes [potato pancakes], apples and honey, haroset [Passover mixture of apples, dates and nuts], and challah) of Judaism are deeply planted in our daughters' lives and children absorb so fully through their senses.

When my husband and I chose, after years of grappling with the decision, to join a temple, we selected a Reform synagogue with a diverse membership. Our interfaith/multiracial family is warmly welcomed by the congregation and the rabbi actively seeks to highlight multiculturalism as a positive aspect of our synagogue.

Does our religious choice make our daughters less Chinese? Absolutely not! We even learn about different cultures at temple. "Mitzvah Day," a spring ritual at our temple, focused this year on Ethiopian Jews. We cooked ethnic foods, learned a dance, tried on native clothing and heard stories from Ethiopians who live in Israel. The message about diversity in Jewish culture was strong, plus we had fun!

Beshert (preordained)--I've often thought about the fact that my daughter Rachel was born in the vicinity of Kaifeng in China, which is a well-known ancient settlement of Jewish people who have been absorbed into the Chinese populace. It's occurred to me that she has a biological link to the ancient Jewish people and perhaps one day, with DNA testing, this mother's intuition will be confirmed. The legacy of the Jewish community in Kaifeng helped awaken the strength of my conviction that we should raise our daughter, who was adopted in 1995, Jewishly.

We traveled to China again in 2003 to adopt our younger daughter and shortly afterwards the girls and I submerged ourselves in the mikvah (ritual bath) for a Jewish conversion ceremony. I never felt the need to have Rachel converted but, interestingly, it was she who raised the issue, by telling me that she didn't feel "really" Jewish. Although I didn't probe, it may be that she had talked with other adopted Chinese girls who had conversion ceremonies. The ritual was joyous and powerful, and now we have conversion documents for our daughters.

I am an American Jew and can't be a Chinese mother to our daughters, although my little one, Renata, who was adopted at 2 years old, has a game where I pretend to be a Chinese mommy. We talk in make-believe Chinese and the "conversations" are playful and happy. I don't understand the significance to her 5-year-old mind, but she certainly enjoys the imaginary role I play.

In the real world, my husband and I always look for ways to bring Chinese and Chinese-American culture into our lives. Rachel, now 11, studied Chinese dance and language before kindergarten. Since then, intermittently, she learned snippets of Mandarin in small groups with other adopted Chinese girls or with a tutor. In our small New Jersey town, we are fortunate that Mandarin is offered in middle school. Rachel now studies Chinese language and culture in public school and it's our hope and expectation that she will continue with Mandarin through twelfth grade.

Renata adores her Chinese dance classes, held at the local Chinese weekend school that rents

space in our town's high school. And, in our mostly Caucasian community we have found several Chinese-American high school girls to baby-sit for us. Our daughters have a great time with the high school girls and we think the babysitters are comforting role models who provide ethnic similarity that we can't give our children.

A trip to Chinatown in New York City lands us in a big restaurant filled with multigenerational Chinese families enjoying huge dinners. We jump right in and have a grand time with the food and ambience. Our daughters coo about the adorable babies we see--making lots of eye contact with the little ones. The food, particularly the noodles and specially prepared rice, is delicious comfort food.

Although with two Caucasian parents we are different from the Chinese families at the restaurant, I feel we blend in with the crowd. After all, this is New York City, but many cities across the nation have similar demographics.

At Christmastime our traditions are both Christian and Jewish. Along with our beautiful hanukkahs (menorahs) we also have a tree which the girls decorate with their Catholic father. He loves sharing the ritual of buying a fresh tree and decorating it on Christmas Eve. We celebrate Christmas Day with my husband's family: exchanging lots of presents and sitting down to a huge meal of Italian holiday dishes.

Israel is a place I've yet to visit, but Rachel and I talk of making the trip around the time of her Bat Mitzvah, in about two years. More immediate is our plan to bring our daughters to China for a homeland visit with the hope that it will help them feel grounded in their birth culture. A visit to Kaifeng, the ancient Jewish settlement, is part of our touring plan.

Are we grafting Judaism onto our Chinese daughters? I suppose you could say so, but what are the alternatives? To raise them Catholic? With no religion? Seek out Buddhism or Taoism? After many years and endless discussion we decided to raise our first daughter as a Jew. As my husband once said, "You don't shop for a religion."

Will our daughters be practicing Jews when they reach adulthood? My crystal ball is murky, but I'd say we have as much chance as any Jewish family.

I didn't marry under a chuppah (Jewish wedding canopy) but one day, maybe, I will have the knachas (joy) of being the mother of a Jewish bride.



Hedi Molnar, a writer and editor, lives in New Jersey with her husband and two daughters. Her family belongs to Temple Ner Tamid in Bloomfield, N.J.



Does Adoption Make Us An Interfaith Family?

By Debra A.W. Berger

Some people think that when you adopt a child from a religion other than your own you then become an interfaith family. I feel that religious beliefs are formulated from the way you were raised or what you choose to follow and believe when you are older and emancipated.

We adopted our raven-haired, chipmunk-cheeked daughter from Guatemala when she was 4 months old. We named her Chloe' Lauren America and also gave her a Hebrew name. The likelihood is she was not born Jewish. This was not a problem for me, my husband or our families. All who came to know and love her accepted her from day one and we do not consider ourselves an interfaith family. I would feel differently if she had been older when she joined our family and had memories of practicing another religion. My conscience wouldn't have let me take those memories from her, even if I could. They would have been a part of who she had become. However, at 4 months of age she was not yet aware of religion, Christmas or Hanukkah.



We belong to the Reform movement. Our temple's requirements for those born to non-Jewish mothers are for families to raise the child in the Jewish faith, give him or her a Hebrew name and visit the mikvah (ritual bath), where she could be officially converted. We were told the second and third requirement were optional. However, we opted for all three. Being one for ceremony, the three requirements felt right to me. However, they were not done at the same time.

From the beginning our daughter was raised Jewishly. She wasn't formally given a Hebrew name until she was a year old, even though I knew what it would be. We wanted to go to the mikvah around that time too;

however I was told that we would have to totally submerge her three times! My little one had developed an ear infection and a fear of water. I couldn't see subjecting her to what she would view as trauma. So, due to circumstances beyond our control it took seven years for us to visit the mikvah. Chloe' and I slowly walked into the soothing warmth of the mikvah waters and together became "a Jewish family." She didn't want to be naked in front of her father.

Just this past November we celebrated Chloe's Bat Mitzvah. It was a joyous time and we consider her to be as Jewish as she can be. Proudly, Chloe' wears her Jewish heart on her sleeve.

For the most part, it has been easy. However, I remember one winter when Chloe' tried her best to convince us to bring a Christmas tree into our home. Her rationale was she was half Jewish and half Christian; half Jewish from us (her father and me) and half Christian because of her birthmother. So she should be "*allowed*" a Christmas tree. I told her, "Religion is what you are raised. You've been raised as a Jew, so you are a Jew and Jews do not have Christmas trees." Is this particularly an adoption issue? I guess so. However, I was not adopted and I remember wanting a Christmas tree, too. We were the only Jews in our neighborhood and I found it hard not to have Santa when it seemed as if everyone else did. I used whatever ammunition I could muster to convince my parents to let me have that tree! And they held fast to their religious convictions, as did I on that cold winter day.

Then there were the times when Chloe' adamantly told us that when she was older and married with kids, that she would not raise them in the Jewish faith. When we asked why, she said, "Being Jewish is boring. Other religions aren't boring. Besides I could have a tree if I wasn't Jewish." And I remember hearing other kids tell their parents the same thing. I never looked at this as an adoption issue. I never asked her if it was, though I suppose it might be. Maybe deep down she feels that she was probably not born Jewish so why should she have to go to Hebrew school or be Jewish. I silently feared this might be true and I didn't want to face that issue. Is this the end of the dilemma? Maybe not.

On the flip side, I fondly remember riding home from Hebrew school engaged in a conversation about whether or not Moses was a gifted man. This question was posed to me by my then 8-year-old Chloe', who surmised that anyone (Moses) who could convince groups of people that God sent down the Ten Commandments from the heavens for us to follow had to be gifted! Or how about listening to her plan to visit terminally ill children at the hospital "because it's a mitzvah, Mom!"

We do not deny our daughter's cultural heritage, as this is certainly a part of who she is. This will be the seventh year we attend a Latin American culture camp. We visit similar museums, and we eat Latin American foods, sometimes noting the similarity to Jewish foods--empanadas and knishes, anyone? The only thing we do not do is participate in festivals or holidays that have a Christian basis.

As parents we strive to give our kids a better world, something more than we had ourselves. Sending Chloe' to Hebrew school was one of the gifts I wanted for her. Unfortunately my parents could not give me and my three siblings this gift, so we're somewhat at a loss when it comes to carrying out certain Jewish obligations. This was very telling this past December when we found ourselves preparing to honor my mother's first *yahrzeit* (memorial anniversary). We were not planning anything formal, and it was just for our immediate family. The only one who could recite the Mourner's Kaddish (prayer) was, you guessed it, my Guatemalan baby! How proud my mother would have been of her granddaughter reciting Kaddish for her. How proud we all were.

It's safe to say Chloe' was probably the most proud of all. "I just performed my first mitzvah as a woman, Mom." Is she Jewish? You bet!



Debra A.W. Berger is married and a mom to a son and two daughters, one by adoption. She currently is a Jewish educator in New Jersey and is active in the adoption community. Debra was the former membership chair and editor of "Star Tracks," the quarterly newsletter of [Stars of David, International, Inc.](#), a Jewish adoption support group, and she writes for similar publications from time to time. You may reach her at DebraB7416@aol.com.

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A Mother's Pride

By Susan Freudenheim

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A few weeks ago as the school year ended, my daughter stood on the bimah in the chapel of our synagogue and, with four of her fellow fifth-graders, led her Jewish day school's Monday Tefillah services. Four girls and a boy shared the honor, and their radically varying sizes bespoke the varying growth spurts that characterize this awkward age. Likewise, their maturity and ability to address their classmates ebbed and flowed during their short moments in the spotlight. But what brought that poignant mix of mother's pride and prejudice home, watching her among her friends in this holy setting, was just how different and alike my Rachel is from the rest. For, even as she blends in beautifully, she cannot help but stand out--my daughter was born Chinese.

Rachel is a Jewish American girl from China. My husband Richard Core and I enrolled her, starting at age 4, in [Temple Israel](#) of Hollywood, Calif., schools full time. Like every other kid there, she has become somewhat fluent in conversational Hebrew, knows the prayers by heart and has learned her Judaica lessons well. She is not the only Asian girl in her school--there are three, all adopted (two from China, one from Vietnam)--and she says she feels no different from anyone else. But among the mix of mostly Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews that make up our community, she adds a special spice. And in her own discreet style, I believe she has helped teach her friends to be colorblind in ways that could last a lifetime.

Rachel will become bat mitzvah in slightly more than two years, and she has been preparing for that moment since pre-school. As a fourth-grader, she read from the Torah at a day school service, and earlier this year, she gave a d'var Torah before the upper grades. I attended both events, of course, and each time I cried.

To see my child leading prayers is a rite of passage that evokes the deepest emotions. I know I would probably cry to see any child of mine connect with the ancient rituals, taking on the mantle of our ancestors, and I am pleased that Rachel embarked upon this path in the safe, exploratory confines of her school. But when I look at Rachel in this context, I think, also, of her divergent origins, of her birth parents whom we likely will never meet, of her own genetic ancestors and their traditions that she carries, within her as well, in ways that are both conscious and not.

It is a gift to share our lives with a child of mixed culture, because nothing is obvious. As we think

ahead to her bat mitzvah ceremony, we are thinking of ways of acknowledging Rachel's special heritage, whether in the food we serve--how bad could a kosher Chinese buffet be?--or the flowers, or maybe a special prayer. We will give thanks for the good fortune that made her part of our family, for the coincidence of adoption possibilities that led us to a foreign land to meet our daughter.

We will remember, too, as we see her accept the responsibilities of becoming a Jewish adult, that she is also becoming a woman of Asian and American heritage, and that whether she wants to or not, throughout her life she will be opening the eyes of those who look upon her. Rachel does not see herself as anything but one of her group, and she's mostly right in that. But the other day, when I watched her from afar, on the bimah, saying the Shema, I could not help but be reminded of how far we have come from the state-run orphanage filled with loving caregivers in Southern China, where Richard and I met her more than a decade ago.



Susan Freudenheim is managing editor of *The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*.

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Don't Think Of Me As Different--I'm Not

By Rachel Core

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July 14, 2006

My name is Rachel, and I am a Jewish American girl who was born in China. I was adopted. I am finishing the fifth grade, and I go to a Jewish school where I am not the only Chinese girl--there is one other girl from China named Willow, who is in the fourth grade. We are friends.

Sometimes I do not want to be different from the other kids, although people at school do not make me feel different because I am Chinese. And anyway, I think to myself everybody in the whole school is different in their own special way. I think I am also different because I am very outgoing and active. All of my friends have great qualities.

I love all of the Jewish holidays that my school has taught me about. I like the Purim shpiel because it is funny and a great way to learn about Megilah Esther. On Tu B'Shevat, my school takes a long walk up to Runyon Canyon and interacts with nature. My favorite holiday that my school celebrates is Lag B'Omer, when we go to the park and are teamed up with our whole class. We play games and have fun. We also have a jogathon to raise money for the school. I do not think of myself when I'm having fun as being Chinese or different, just as equal to everyone.

At camp a lot of people ask if I am Chinese. Then I tell them I am adopted, and that I was born in China. Sometimes they offend me with the way they look at me after I tell them that I am from China. They look as if they have never seen a Chinese person before. It can get kind of annoying telling your background to a lot of people. I am also proud when I do tell them my background, because you should always be proud of what you are.

Every week at school, we have services on Monday and Friday. At the end of this year, I helped lead services in front of the upper grades in my school. I felt really good when I was leading prayers in front of everybody, because it meant a lot to help the congregation start a prayer. I try not to get distracted during services because sometimes my friends do not want to pray to God, so they start to talk. I always try to sing my best, with respect and meaning.

I am having my bat mitzvah in about two years. I am very excited because this way I can have a better connection to God. I know it will take work, but the work will pay off. I cannot wait to show on the bimah how proud I am to be a Jew. In first grade I went to a mikvah with my mom.

My dad is preparing to convert, so my whole immediate family will be Jewish. Still, right now my family considers ourselves all Jewish. I am a Jewish American girl from China ready to take on the Jewish world.



Rachel Core lives in the Los Angeles area with her family.

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"Fulfilling a Mitzvah": As More Jews Adopt, Perceptions of Jewish Identity Change

By Doug Chandler

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Julie Zuckman, a Northampton, Mass., resident with plans to become a puppeteer, doesn't regard herself as religious or even spiritual, and neither does her husband, Peter Haas, a professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

But their son, David Haas, a 12-year-old adopted from Peru in 1993, feels differently--so much so that the family had "quite a set-to" on the first night of Passover, Zuckman recalls, laughing at the memory.

"He thought we were going through [the seder] too quickly and weren't being serious enough," she says, adding that this, of course, came after she prepared the dinner, invited the guests and "knocked myself out." The next evening, when the family attended a friend's more religious seder, "he was thrilled. Everybody wore a kippa, they sang songs and they didn't skip."

On a similar but more somber note, when Zuckman's mother-in-law died three years ago, David "was the one who wanted to light yahrzeit candles and keep the traditions," Zuckman says. "He had this intuitive sense that we needed rituals, so I took out my siddur and we did Kaddish every night."

In these and other ways, Zuckman continues, he "brought me along."

Her experience is often the same in other families who have adopted children from other cultures and are raising them as Jews. Either because the child is more spiritual than his parents, as David certainly is, or because the parents want to impart a sense of Jewish identity, adopting cross-culturally often moves a family to a greater affiliation with the Jewish community.

Adoption, along with intermarriage, is also changing the face of American Jewry, a population made up mostly of Eastern European or Ashkenazic Jews, according to Jewish educators and spiritual leaders in the Pioneer Valley. When Rabbi Mark Shapiro, for instance, attends a rehearsal or performance of the children's choir at Sinai Temple, a Reform synagogue in Springfield, Mass.,

he sees many faces that "are not classically Jewish." Two of his congregants, each with a daughter from China, say at least a third of the choir's members are now Asian children.

By all accounts, cross-cultural adoption among Jewish parents has been increasing for at least 20 years. The National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01, conducted by United Jewish Communities, reports that slightly more than five percent of all Jewish families had adopted children in the household, accounting for about 35,000 children.

Gary Tobin, president of the Institute for Jewish and Community Research, an independent think tank in San Francisco, believes the number may be even higher. "It's been a phenomenon now for about two generations," he said, "and we see it in local studies, too."

The factors driving that increase are the age at which American Jews get married, which is later than the age for Americans at large, and a lower fertility rate among Jewish women, according to the survey.

Other studies show that, of all the adopted children in Jewish households, more and more are coming from other cultures, such as China, Russia and South America. One estimate places the number of children born overseas at 25 percent.

In the Pioneer Valley, few families offer a more compelling portrait of this trend than the two formed by Jill and Patti Goldstein.

Sisters who grew up in Longmeadow, Mass., where they live today, both are single, both are social workers--and, within four years of the other, both adopted a baby girl from China. Today, their daughters--Jill's Danielle, 7, and Patti's Hallie, 11--could be sisters themselves, both mothers said in recent interviews. They often play together, do homework together and, in general, adore each other, as cousins often do.

Although Patti, 49, is the younger sister, it was she who first chose to adopt, a decision she reached in her mid-30s, as she found herself growing older without the child she always wanted.

"I never pictured myself being childless," Patti said, adding that she has worked with kids since she was 11, when the YMCA hired her as a counselor for one of its camps. She works today as a social worker in the Springfield Public Schools.

Still, Patti never thought seriously about adoption until 12 years ago, the year before she adopted Hallie, when she attended Rosh Hashanah services at Temple Emanuel of Andover, Mass., the synagogue led by her brother, Rabbi Robert Goldstein. While there, Patti recalled, she spoke with another Jewish woman and the 3-year-old she adopted from Guatemala, discovering, in the process, that a seed had been planted.

Three other discoveries helped cement her decision, said Patti, who read scores of books and articles about the subject. At the time, she learned, the healthiest children available for adoption were said to be girls from China, an important consideration for a single mother without the resources to care for a child with health problems. Moreover, girls from China were among the youngest children who could be adopted, which, in the view of experts, held the promise of fewer, if any, emotional problems later in life.

Just as important, if not more so, is what she learned about Jewish law and tradition, which considers adoption "a good thing to do," she said.

Bolstered by the information, Patti traveled to China on September 1, 1994, through a trip organized by Alliance for Children, an adoption agency in Wellesley, Mass. She and Hallie met at a hotel in Nanjing, about two hours away from the baby's orphanage, on September 5, an occasion mother and daughter still celebrate each year.

For Jill, the path toward adoption began with the same conversation in Andover that so motivated her sister, but her thinking solidified as she fell in love with Hallie. She spent many hours with her new niece in the months after Patti's adoption, calling herself a "lucky aunt" and watching as Hallie began growing into a warm, active child with many interests.

"I wanted to have a child, and I hadn't found anyone I wanted to have a child with," said Jill, who was married for six years in the early 1980s. In addition, she "always had an interest in China" and began to notice the similarities in Chinese and Jewish cultures, both of which, she said, place an emphasis on family and education.

Finally, with the help of a private agency in Brookline, Mass., Jill received a picture of Danielle and traveled to China seven years ago to adopt the baby, then 11 months. The two met at a hotel in Chansha, the capital of Hunan Province, and boarded a plane to the U.S. within two weeks of their meeting.

Whenever any parent or set of parents adopts a child, they have embarked on "a lifelong process," said Susan Phillips, the director of AdoptionLink, a program of the Jewish Family Service of Western Massachusetts. She also believes that the biggest issue in raising a child is "identity formation."

At some point, Phillips said, all children wonder about things like where they received their physical traits or why some of those features might be different from those of their parents. The questions they begin to ponder, normally in adolescence, might include, "Who am I in relationship to my parents? Who am I in relationship to my peers? Who am I in relationship to the world?"

Being Jewish adds yet another layer to the youngster's search, especially "if you're a child from China, and you're 12 or 13, working toward your Bar or Bat Mitzvah," Phillips said. "They wonder where they fit in."

All the families interviewed for this article are trying to raise their children as Jews, as Americans and, depending on where they were born, as Chinese, Korean, Russian or South American--efforts that are both symbolic and substantive.

Jill and Patti Goldstein, for instance, named their daughters after relatives, as Jewish custom dictates, and saved their Chinese names, which are now middle names. Danielle's middle name is Guoxing, meaning "Fragrant Country," while Hallie's is Jiang Hong or "Red River."

The merged names have given Dani and Hallie "something from their past in China and something from the heritage of their adoptive families," Patti said.

Some families have even traveled back to their children's native countries.

Dr. Deborah R. Starr, head of school at Heritage Academy in Longmeadow, Mass., said she and her husband, Howard, journeyed to South Korea nine years ago with their twins, now 18, whom they adopted as babies. Zuckman and Haas traveled with David in 2003 to Peru, where their son met his birth mother.

But children often respond to the most well-intentioned efforts in ways their parents don't anticipate.

The Starr twins, Selena and Elianna, lost interest in Korean things at 11 or 12, their mother said, adding that they simply thought of themselves as American "and enough of the picture books." In another episode, Starr recalled, she suggested they wear traditional Korean dresses at their Bat Mitzvah, "and they looked at me like I was from Mars."

Only in recent months has her daughters' interest in their own history begun to re-emerge, said Starr, a resident of Suffield, Conn. Both have expressed a desire to visit Korea again and search for their birth records.

Harold Berman, the executive director of the Jewish Federation of Greater Springfield, said issues of identity have begun to come up in conversations with his son Micah, now 6, who was adopted from Russia.

"He has asked questions like, basically, why was I [his father] born Jewish and why wasn't he born Jewish," said Berman, who recently adopted another Russian child, Ilana, 2. "We've answered, in the most positive sense, that he gets to choose and we try to give him role models of others who weren't born Jewish but chose it ... I think the most important thing for a child is to get across that it's normative."

That message appears to have worked in Micah's case, as well as for David Haas, the Starr sisters and the Goldstein kids. All the children have gone through conversions; all have attended either Hebrew school or Jewish day school; and all seem just as comfortable being Jewish as they do being American.

"The people at my Hebrew school and Sunday school say you should feel proud of being Jewish," said David, who attends Beit Ahavah, a Reform synagogue in Florence, Mass. He has taken that advice to heart, he added.

Dani Goldstein, a student at Sinai Temple, recalled how one of her friends, another girl from China, told her that "most Chinese children are Christian." But Dani responded in a way that would have made her mother proud, telling her friend, "I'm different and it's nice being different."

As involved as the children are in the Jewish community, their parents are unaware of any bias or discrimination they may have faced from fellow Jews.

One local rabbi, David Dunn Bauer of the Jewish Community of Amherst, said he is sure that, "on some organic level, there's still a sense of awkwardness or confusion on the street. There's still some note of surprise from people." But, in his view, that doesn't translate into discrimination.

He added that members of the Jewish community still make many presumptions about what constitutes a Jewish family or who appears to be a Jew. "There are lots of things that are antiquated or obsolete which haven't slipped from the community's consciousness."

The area's synagogues and Jewish day schools have taken steps to fight those presumptions, emphasizing that differences are not only positive, but normal in the Jewish world.

Sandra Warren, principal of the Solomon Schechter Day School of the Pioneer Valley, said she talks to her staff every year "about the importance of making differences feel acceptable ... There are lots of differences among kids, and you don't want them to get the idea that it's a big secret," said Warren.

Rabbi Shapiro, noting that Jewish law considers adoption as much of a blessing as giving birth, said his congregation includes children with Asian faces. "But once they become members of our community, they have Jewish faces, too. Far more important than the face of American Jewry is the soul and practice of American Jewry."

Adoption Resources

Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies: Many of this group's nearly 150 member agencies offer services to families interested in adoption, to birth mothers, to families who have adopted and to people who have been adopted. For information on services in a particular community, call the association at (800) 634-7346 or write to AJFCA@ajfca.org. The association's Website, ajfca.org, also has an Adoption Information Directory in which you can search for member agencies.

Jewish Multiracial Network: Offers online resources, engages in advocacy and organizes annual retreats, holiday celebrations and other events to build a more diverse Jewish community. For information, visit JewishMultiracialNetwork.org, call Cynthia Weinger at (212) 242-5586 or write to cynthia@isabellafreedman.org.

Stars of David International: Provides support and information to prospective parents, adoptive families and adult adoptees. To contact the national organization, call (800) 782-7349 or write to StarsDavid1@aol.com. To find a local chapter, visit starsofdavid.org.

Other support groups: Groups like [Families with Children from China](#), [Families for Russian and Ukrainian Adoption](#) and [Latin America Parents Association](#) support families who have adopted or are seeking to adopt.



Doug Chandler is a freelance writer based in New York.



When Jews Can't Multiply: Pain of Infertility Hits Hard for Many

By Eric Fingerhut

Reprinted with permission of [Washington Jewish Week](#).

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Melissa Ford can't help crying during the portion of the Passover seder about how the "barren women of Jerusalem will rise up and have children when the Moshiach comes."

Fall synagogue readings of Genesis can be tough, as well, she says--with Sarah waiting 100 years before giving birth to Isaac, and Rachel telling Jacob, "Give me a child or I'll die!" triggering painful memories.

"I relate to Sarah and [am] worried for her, even though I know the end of the story," Ford says, adding that she can't fathom the 100 years that Abraham's wife waited.

Her own infertility lasted 18 months, an experience that will always be a part of her. It is something women "don't let go, even if they've had children," says Ford, who now has 2-year-old twins.

While she and others who have struggled with infertility believe that the Jewish community generally deals with the issue as well as any religious group, they see room for improvement--particularly in the way synagogues sometimes put such a strong emphasis on children.

Infertility--defined as the inability to conceive after one year of attempts (six months if the woman is over the age of 35) or the inability to carry a pregnancy to live birth--affects 6.1 million people in the United States, or 10 percent of women of the reproductive age population, according to the American Society for Reproductive Medicine.

With recent surveys showing that many Jewish women are marrying later in life and putting off having children until well into their 30s, the percentage of Jews affected could be even higher.

"It's an epidemic in the Jewish community" and "the reasons are well known," says Rabbi Michael Feshbach of [Temple Shalom](#) in Chevy Chase, Md., who dealt with infertility, including two miscarriages, with his wife before the birth of their three children.

But in a religious community where the biblical invocation to "be fruitful and multiply" is emphasized, not being able to conceive a child can bring questions.

Olney, Md., resident Ford, 32, notes that Jews are "pretty open about talking about" having children. Questions about children start at the wedding and inquiries like "are you guys trying?" and "when are you going to give me a grandchild?" are commonplace, she says.

But such well-intentioned inquiries can sting for someone having trouble conceiving, says Michelle Batabba Avda of Woodbridge, Va., who grappled with infertility for five years before giving birth to a daughter eight months ago.

For part of those struggles, she lived in a predominantly Orthodox Jewish community in Boston. "Everyone has lots of children," she says, and is always asking "aren't you pregnant yet, why don't you have children yet?"

She longed for children desperately, and such questions made her feel the impact of her infertility "that much more strongly."

"It's really hard" to be childless in a community that emphasizes family so intensely, agrees "Hannah," an Orthodox woman from Montgomery County, Md., who did not wish to be identified. After 11 years of attempts, she and her husband have since adopted two children.

Hannah says, though, that she and her husband "are very upbeat people" and that they made a point to "get out there and not mope."

"You make sure not to become reclusive and participate in everyone's joyous occasions," she says. "We were going to put a smile on our face ... as difficult as it was."

She notes that some in the community offered comforting advice, while others would choose them for the honor of the kvater--the person who brings the child into the room for a brit.

Tradition says that a childless couple given the honor will receive a special blessing to have a child, and Hannah says that she and her husband received that honor "many, many times."

Yet, events like a brit or a baby naming can be the most painful for infertile couples, says Ford.

While she and her husband, Josh, ended up attending most of them, "there's a lot of tears leading up to the event" and sometimes on the way home, as well.

"It's hard to want that so badly and still see the joy," she says.

"Some people find it selfish because we have a culture of 'tough it out,'" says her husband, 34. But in some cases, he notes, one can be a "better friend [by] not being there."

Feshbach didn't just have to attend such life cycle events--as a rabbi, he officiated at them. But he was able to cope with that by reasoning that "it's not as if they got our baby."

"I personally was able to be very happy at every baby naming I was at," he says.

Even though "for the most part, the Jewish community is very supportive of infertility," Melissa Ford finds a "divide between women who have children and those who don't."

For men, the entree into adulthood seems to be their first job, but for females, it is having kids, she says.

"There's a certain status given to women with children" which has subsided somewhat in recent times, but is "still a benchmark by which many women are judged," says her husband.

And thus, trying to have a baby often becomes a topic of discussion at synagogue. Melissa Ford says that other congregants at Washington, D.C.'s [Adas Israel's](#) egalitarian minyan were the first to give her advice on infertility.

She joked that the Shady Grove Fertility Center in Maryland sometimes looks like "Adas [Israel] minyan, part two."

But her husband says the emphasis in synagogue on family can sometimes hurt.

"The synagogue tradition, all the children come up onto the bima. ... That was a really painful time," says Ford, director of the Washington Jewish Film Festival. "It was painful to see it, week after week. You feel your infertility then, feel you're left out of the celebration."

He also felt a sense of powerlessness during the process.

"From a male perspective, what's so frustrating is you can't fix it," says Ford, adding that guys usually want to be "problem solvers," but there is "very little you can proactively do."

Ken Reid, 47, of Leesburg, Va., had a similar feeling. "You have no control [of it]," he recalled.

He says going to meetings of Resolve: The National Infertility Association and talking to others with the same issues helped a great deal.

"You can't sit back and do nothing," he says, but have to "make things happen" and make decisions about what course of action is best.

One answer can be adoption. Hannah says the community was quite welcoming to her adopted children, who were born Jewish--a choice she and her husband made because, she says, "in the long term, it would make adjusting to life easier" for her children.

"Kids always ... search for [their] identity," and by adopting Jewish children into a Jewish family, "we don't feel we've deprived anyone of their own heritage."

Not every Jewish couple is able to adopt other Jews, though. Now the father of twins who will be 10 next month, Reid and his wife had pursued avenues for adoption before conceiving.

But it can be tough to grapple with that, he says, particularly because so many couples have to go overseas or find a birth mother willing to place their child for adoption.

As he says an adoption attorney quipped, "You're not going to find many pregnant Jewish girls in Potomac to give up a baby."

Noting that congregants in his synagogue, Shaare Shalom in Springfield, Va., have adopted babies of other races and ethnic groups, Reid points out that the Jewish community is "accepting" and that "it doesn't matter [how one] looks, they will certainly be welcomed into the community."

Feshbach agrees, noting that "there is a blessing that has come out of [infertility]--the blessing of adoption."

The synagogue now "looks like a mini-United Nations. The face of 'Who is a Jew' ... is very different than it used to be. ... What it means to be a Jewish family is very different than it used to be."

As for what the Jewish fertile world can do to lessen the pain of the Jewish infertile, Reid cites a way to make adoption easier for families.

Accompanied by a shift in his political outlook in the past decade from left to right, Reid says his family's struggle with infertility "drove home the point" that abortion is wrong.

"There's a million people getting pregnant" and having abortions each year and "there's no effort to marry them with couples" who can't have a baby, he says, leading to many couples going overseas.

Others suggested that synagogues could sometimes be more aware of the emotions among the infertile.

Feshbach says the Rosh Hashanah haftarah reading, which details Hannah's struggle with infertility before giving birth to Samuel, is "so painful for some people" that he is considering substituting an alternate portion.

While it eventually turns out OK for Hannah, people have told him they "don't come to synagogue when it is read" because of the emotions it stirs.

(Hannah is just one of five women who suffer through infertility in the Bible. In addition to Sarah and Rachel, Rebecca and Michal fall victim to it, with Michal, who laughed at David when he was naked, being punished by God with infertility.)

Avda says her family's struggle was more difficult because "we didn't have good Jewish support at the time," although they are now starting to build such support at Ner Shalom Congregation in Woodbridge.

She hopes synagogues would be more aware of the feelings of childless couples. While shuls will often plan activities for singles and families with children, young married couples without kids often seem to get left out. And "families who want to have children feel it even more," she says.

Feshbach stresses that he is focusing on making the synagogue as welcoming to the childless as those with children.

"I believe we have to focus on spiritual community in synagogue life just as much as pediatric Judaism. ... Ultimately, the synagogue community has to be a spiritual experience for everyone there ... a place where we can become whole" that goes beyond the religious school, says Feshbach.

"It takes a village to raise a child," he says. "There are plenty of child raisers among us who do not have a child, and they, too, are a blessing."

Eric Fingerhut is a staff writer for *Washington Jewish Week*.

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Jewish Moms, Chinese Daughters

By Merri Rosenberg

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Also see the sidebar on [Interfaith Parents, Chinese Children](#).

It's just a little hard for me to think of this little China doll taking my mother's name. Your grandmother--this would be hard to explain to her."

-from Daniel Goldfarb's 2004 play "Sarah, Sarah"

But it's *not* so hard to explain anymore. During the past decade, plenty of Jewish grandparents have become familiar with the situation explored in this play, in part about the decision of an older, single Jewish woman to adopt a Chinese baby girl. It's much like real life.

Today, "you're shocked when you see an Asian child with an Asian parent," observes Miriam Hipsh about her former neighborhood on New York's Upper West Side. Hipsh is a 59-year-old writer and the founder of a dating web site for the 50-plus set; she adopted her daughter, WuQing, 11 years ago.

Hipsh's experience--and Goldfarb's play--reflect the convergence of two trends: Older Jewish women, some of whom have spent decades building up careers, who recognize that they want to experience motherhood, and China's "one child only" social policy, which resulted in the large-scale abandonment of baby girls in orphanages. The resulting phenomenon--of single Jewish women adopting Chinese daughters--has begun to transform the Jewish community. In preschools, day schools and after-school religious programs around the country, Asian girls are absorbing Jewish traditions through songs, history lessons and prayers, and learning the davening skills that will enable them to take their place on the bima. And at the same time, their conscientious Jewish mothers, eager to have their daughters embrace both their Jewish and Asian heritage, have enrolled them in Chinese language classes, or Chinese dance, art and music programs, to develop their girls' diverse identities.

Consider WuQing Hipsh, now 12, who is a product of Manhattan's Stephen Wise synagogue nursery school and pre-K program, as well as a veteran of the Hebrew school at B'nai Jeshurun in Manhattan. (Like most of the Chinese daughters adopted by Jews, WuQing was formally converted to Judaism as a baby.) Since 2003, Hipsh and WuQing have lived in East Hampton, New York, where WuQing (whose Hebrew name, Devorah Sarah, is in memory of Hipsh's late

mother, Dorothy), studies Chinese in her middle school and attends Hebrew school locally. She is preparing for her bat mitzvah next year.

"We're at Adas Yisroel, a very small congregation in Sag Harbor [N.Y.], that feels like a community," says Hipsh. "They welcome her. She's much loved by the synagogue. It feels wonderful."

However statistically small this phenomenon of Jewish single mothers with adopted Chinese daughters may be in the greater demographic picture, it has transformed the Jewish communal landscape in ways that weren't even imagined when these founding mothers first ventured to China little more than a decade ago.

Scott Rubin, co-author with Gary Tobin and Diane Tobin of *In Every Tongue: The Racial and Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People* (2005) says that "Chinese girls are being adopted by single women in the Jewish community partly because women with higher levels of education are having children later, and adoption is the avenue they pursue, and Chinese girls are available for adoption. There's an added advantage," Rubin says. "Chinese girls are viewed as less threatening [than boys, or than children of other backgrounds]. We definitely heard the positive stereotype about Asian girls ... 'good behavior' and 'sweet natures' as well as being good students."

Rabbi Cantor (she holds both titles) Angela Warnick Buchdahl, of Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, New York, is the daughter of a Korean mother and an Ashkenazi Jewish father. She was raised in a Jewish household and believes that, "It's different now than when I was a child growing up. It's not as unusual to see children of different races being Jewish."

Still, she notes, "young children look around and don't see Jewish children who look like them. It's still hard. And on an intellectual level, there's the whole question of 'what does it mean to be a Jew?' You're part of a religion, but you're also part of a people, ethnicity or even race. Are we truly an open community, or are we not?"

These questions have begun to intrigue scholars, who are exploring such issues as Jewish identity outside the conventional, Ashkenazic, Euro-centric model. Patricia Lin is project coordinator for the 2003-2007 study of "Asian American Jewish Experience and Identities" at the University of California/Berkeley--and herself a Jew by choice. She says, "There is a struggle within the Jewish community, not just with Asians, to realize the real diversity of the Jewish world."

Adds Buchdahl, "There should be images of non-white children in our [Jewish] books, in the movie and video images. There's an Ashkenazic assumption that it's the Jewish cultural norm. The Jewish community of North America is not honest about representing the historical diversity of our community. It's a challenge for us. We come from mixed multitudes, who were dispersed in many communities, [yet] the Jewish European community is the only one that's taught. We've all been strengthened and enlivened and made more rich by all that learning."

In their book, Gary and Diane Tobin and Scott Rubin show that American Jews are in fact a multi-racial, diverse community. According to their research, 20 percent of the six million Jews in the United States are non-Caucasian: Asian-American (the adopted Chinese girls are not a statistically significant part of this population), African-American, Latino, Sephardic, Middle Eastern and mixed-race Jews. Conversion, adoption and intermarriage have all contributed to this redefinition

of who "looks" Jewish. Gary Tobin points out in a telephone interview that "the make-up of the Jewish people has always been remarkably diverse. Biblical scholars will tell us that we were a collection of tribes. Pay attention to the Torah. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob took spouses from someplace else. Moses and David married black women."

When Lee Miller, a New York-based playwright, decided in 2000 to adopt as a single woman, she recalls "I was originally thinking of going to Russia, which was my family background." Perturbed by the health problems of some adopted Russian babies she had read about who had fetal alcohol syndrome or other problems--and plagued by the idea that someday her child might look at her and think, "My ancestors killed her ancestors," she looked elsewhere. Miller says that she found, in contrast, that the Chinese children came from "regular families" and were available for adoption either because their parents were too poor to raise them or because of China's only one-child allowing.

Seeing a documentary about orphaned Chinese baby girls, Miller felt that "all these little girls needed help." And so she undertook the journey to find her daughter, Emma Yael, now 10.

Miller, who had her daughter converted at B'nai Jeshurun in Manhattan, where her dip in the mikvah was witnessed by Miller's mother and sister, says, "My Orthodox aunt could not have been happier--one more to enter the fold."

What may seem relatively simple when bringing a baby or toddler to a Families with Children from China playgroup takes on other meaning when pre-adolescent girls start to explore their dual identities. Nor is this an entirely uncharted situation--the experience of an earlier generation of adopted Korean orphans suggests some ways this scenario may play out.

As Dr. Lin has observed in her study participants from across the U.S., Canada and elsewhere, Asian children who have been doted upon by a community when they are young may have quite different experiences as they grow up. "I've talked to women--Korean adoptees--who went up to bat mitzvah age in their synagogue, and were shunned once they were in their 20s and 30s. When they leave the community, or are not with their parents, they're seen as Asian. They're not being accepted as Jews in Hillel. They'll walk in with a Caucasian non-Jew, and the non-Jew is thought to be the Jew. The Jewish community is not universally welcoming."

Recently, some young Chinese girls in the Boston-area Jewish community have been invited to partner with Asian college students at Wellesley College, in a kind of big-sister program. "The adoptees feel this is great," says Lin.

Lin underscores the importance of recognizing the centuries-long historical connections between Jews and China to help these families make the connections easier for their daughters. "There were Jews in China a real long time ago," she explains.

Providing a strong Jewish identity, balanced with an equally respectful nod towards their Chinese heritage, is a major priority for the mothers of these Asian-Jewish daughters.

Judi Sherman of Phoenix, a senior vice-president at investment house Smith Barney, has been clear that her Chinese daughter is going to have a bat mitzvah. Her nine-and-a-half-year-old, Annie Gabrielle LiNa (the last part of her given name is Chinese) "is very much into learning

about Judaism," says Sherman. "She's never questioned her identity. Out West, the religion seems to be very welcoming. Our rabbi has a sibling who adopted a Chinese daughter."

Integrating the two traditions has so far not given rise to anything that might shake up the Jewish world. Rabbi Judy Spicehandler, a rabbi-educator at [North Shore Congregation Israel](#) in Glencoe, Illinois, says that when her 14-year-old Chinese-Jewish daughter was younger they would decorate their succah with Chinese images, like a dragon. "I did everything--Chinese, Hebrew, English," says Spicehandler. "I tried to merge the Chinese theme. My daughter was very comfortable with her Jewish identity."

While issues around bat mitzvah are imminent, concerns about dating are farther away--and most of the women interviewed said that they weren't worrying about that for now.

With a bat mitzvah on the horizon, Hipsh says, "At 13, they choose. She could choose not to be Jewish, but it's not an issue. She's a Jewish child in a Jewish family. I don't know what awaits her. I don't know about her identity search; as yet, there's not the need to deny any part of it. I'm not worried about the dating part. My grandchildren will be Jewish. I made a decision that the more identity I give her, the easier it will be for her." To encourage an identity with her Chinese side, the family is part of a group of other single mothers, some of them Jewish, with Chinese daughters, who frequently get together for Chinese food and other celebrations, Jewish and otherwise.

As 11-year-old WuQing sees it, "When you're adopted, you get to choose whether you're Jewish or not. At my bat mitzvah, I'm going to say I'm choosing to be Jewish." What she enjoys about her dual heritage is that "You get to celebrate more holidays--like Chinese New Year's, normal New Year's and Jewish New Year's."

Most of these girls are still too young to have had a bat mitzvah. Others are still in the planning stages, with not much thought given to details, except perhaps for including Chinese food in the party menu.

One teenager, who did not want her name used for this article, is at a point where she wants simply to be "another white Jewish girl" and not have to deal with the dual identity she confronts in the larger world. Almost all adoptees wrestle with issues of dual identities, but for children adopted out of orphanages there can also be a residual "survivor's guilt" about those left behind.

For her traditional bat mitzvah, this girl's dvar Torah concerned the "Mishpatim" portion, which includes the passage about "not wronging a stranger" or the widows and orphans in the community. She directly addressed the larger social issue of why there are so many adoptees from China, and urged her listeners to take positive action to help these children. She said, "These children are like the widows and orphans of the Torah. They are very vulnerable and they need our help. Ignoring them is just as bad as oppressing or wronging them. Some of the children are lucky, and find wonderful homes in other countries with families that adopt them and love them. But we have to help the ones who never have the chance. That is why I will be donating part of my bat mitzvah presents to help children in the orphanages, especially in the Wuhan Foundling Hospital, which is the orphanage that found me my family ... Everyone can actively do something to help others, like donate money or clothing or food or time to help people who are less fortunate. If everybody did that, soon there would no longer be any strangers, the whole world would all be

one mishpacha."

Despite this heartfelt melding of Chinese and Jewish experience, reactions to giving these Chinese girls a Jewish identity are still not always predictable.

"I got a lot of grief for sending her to a Jewish day school from the general Chinese adoption community," says Joan Story, a clinical social worker in Manhattan with a 7-year-old daughter, Alexa. "They felt she wouldn't be around a lot of other Asians. She would have been in a New York private school anyway, with only a few Asian children in each class. There are some adopted Asian children in her school, just not in her class."

When Story attempted to introduce Alexa to a Chinese dance class, Alexa refused to go back. As Story concedes, "She's very identified with the Jewish community. She told me that 'We can't leave this building. It's special, because this building celebrates Christmas and Hanukkah. Other buildings are just Christian.'"

Single mothers aren't the only ones to struggle with these issues.

Randi Rosenkrantz, 55, of Houston, Texas, and her husband, 52, made sure that both of their adopted Chinese daughters--10-year-old Jill and 6-year-old Kate--had Jewish baby naming ceremonies as well as immersion in the mikvah. "I wanted my children to be well-grounded, and in a Caucasian family where they do not look like us, I need and wanted to find a way. So I decided that through our religion they would hopefully feel more of a connection," she explains in an e-mail message. "They will both have a bat mitzvah."

Rosenkrantz is making an effort to ensure that her daughters are linked to their Chinese heritage as well. "We stay connected to other families who have adopted from China," she says. "We have Asian influences in our home, especially artwork. I have a book collection myself that the kids will share as they get older, that have to do with China and/or Chinese adoption. I bought books for the kids on China that were age appropriate. We celebrate Chinese New Year."

With her husband, Lisa Gibbs is raising two daughters, 10 and 5, both adopted from China. Uncomfortable with the egalitarian Conservative synagogue they initially belonged to in Brooklyn, Gibbs--who attended yeshiva until eighth grade--switched her daughters to a Jewish cultural program. Gibbs reports in an e-mail, "While I am somewhat sad that [her daughter Basya] will have a less traditional Jewish upbringing, I like the program there far more in terms of Jewish ethics, and I notice that they are doing far more in the area of Jewish identity ... She has even decided that she likes learning Yiddish--and this is after refusing to learn Chinese, and hating Hebrew at Hebrew school and Spanish in public school! Somehow this school has made learning Yiddish a positive to her!"

Gibbs adds, "I want them to feel REALLY Jewish and REALLY Chinese, not some watered-down version." Her 5-year-old, Mira, takes Chinese dance class and watches Chinese language and song tapes.

For other parents whose adopted Chinese daughters are still quite young, there is an almost touching faith that by the time their girls are older there will be no doubt about their place in the Jewish community.

Debbie Halperin, living in Suffern, New York, has a 3-year-old daughter from China, and an 11-year-old daughter from her first marriage. "The little one goes to synagogue for nursery school," she says. "Laci loves being Jewish. She loves Hanukkah, she knows the prayers for Shabbat. She's a Jewish girl through and through. She's part of the Jewish family. She'll have a bat mitzvah and be married under a huppah." Halperin, 42, is a founding member of a Jewish/Asian adoption group that recently celebrated its third Hanukkah party.

Ultimately, of course, little matters other than the bonds that have formed between mother and daughter.

"She's been enriched by the Jewish element, and I've been enriched by the Chinese element," notes Hipsh. "It's all good."



A freelance writer based in Westchester County, N.Y., Merri Rosenberg was a regular contributor to [Education Update](#), [Lilith](#), [Jewish Week](#) and [Westchester magazine](#).

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Interfaith Parents, Chinese Children

By Merri Rosenberg

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Sidebar to [Jewish Moms, Chinese Daughters](#).

The usual tug of war that occurs in intermarried families about how to raise the children can take on an additional dimension when race is involved, whether the child in question is an adopted Chinese girl, or when one partner is Jewish and the other an Asian non-Jew.

Hoong Yee Lee Krakauer, a Chinese-American woman married to a Jewish man, jokes that her children, 15 and 18 years old, are "idol-worshiping heathen" and "non-discriminatory party animals." Although Krakauer was raised in the Episcopal church, which had sponsored her Buddhist parents' emigration from China in the late 1930s, religion hasn't exerted much of a pull in her household.

"Identity has never been explored through the lens of religion," she says. "We preserved the spirit of the holidays, like my mother making Harvest Moon cakes with phyllo dough and Skippy peanut butter. Now my daughter, who's in college, is exploring an identity beyond 'my mother's Chinese and my father's Jewish.'"

Stacey Shub, an Atlanta Jew, and her husband, who is Catholic, have adopted a daughter, Sky, from China. "I was moved a few years ago hearing about the girls being left. Feminism was a piece of it." So far, Sky is at the Jewish nursery school, but Shub concedes that her husband "wants her to be part of him, and part of me." She expects that this difference of opinion over Sky's religious upbringing is not an issue that will be resolved quickly.

For Heidi Gralla, a freelance journalist in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, her marriage to a Chinese-American man has not complicated their children's upbringing as Reform Jews.

"On my end it's religious, and for my husband, it's more cultural," Gralla explains. Ironically, Gralla is the one who researched Chinese New Year to make the presentations at the children's schools. Their three children, an 8-year-old daughter and two sons, five and one, "have a clear sense of being Jewish and Chinese," she says. ("Okay, maybe not the baby.") "They had their baby namings at Woodlands Community Temple in White Plains and they will be bar and bat mitzvah at Woodlands. My parents still belong to Woodlands." It's her family temple, and her

community, and a place where her children know they belong.

"So far, we have not blended the two," says Gralla.



A freelance writer based in Westchester County, N.Y., Merri Rosenberg was a regular contributor to [Education Update](#), [Lilith](#), [Jewish Week](#) and [Westchester magazine](#).

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Dual Identity, Double the Questions: It's Not Easy Being Jewish and Chinese

By Sarah Price Brown

Reprinted with permission from [The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles](#).

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Chinese villagers found the baby, abandoned by her birth parents, in a basket on a riverbank.

"Just like Moses," the child's adoptive mother, Terri Pollock, says. Today, Leah Hua Xia Pollock, 14, lives in Seattle and plays the flute in her temple's klezmer band.

Last year, Leah became a bat mitzvah. As she stood on the bimah, looking out at the crowd of white faces before her, "it just dawned on me," she said, "that even if I do look in the mirror and see someone different from the people around me, it doesn't matter, because I'm accepted."

Leah is among the first in a tidal wave of Chinese-born girls who are growing up in Jewish families in the United States. When she was adopted in 1992, she was one of only 206 Chinese children brought to the United States that year. Last year, Americans adopted slightly more than 7,900 children from China, nearly all of them girls.

China only opened its doors in a big way to international adoption in 1991 to help mitigate its problem of abandoned children, brought on by China's one-child policy. That policy, which the government enforces by imposing economic penalties for noncompliance, combined with the traditional culture that sons care for their parents in old age, had resulted in a sea of neglected children, particularly girls.

These days, more American families are adopting from China than any other foreign country, and a large number of those families are Jewish. A wave of girls is now coming of age, starting to face challenging issues of identity.

There is the question of what it means to look Jewish--for one--and the matter of who is a Jew in the eyes of the Jewish community and society at large. But just as important, there is the question of how to incorporate both Chinese culture and Judaism into these children's lives--without sacrificing one for the other.

The experiences of Leah and her peers suggest that these cross-cultural clans can function as well as any other sort of family, but inevitably, there are moments of discomfort and confusion. And sooner or later, these children--like all Jews--must make their own decisions about identity and faith.

On a recent afternoon at Temple Isaiah, a Reform congregation in West Los Angeles, 13-year-old Lily Ling Goldstein, dressed in jean shorts and flip-flops, practiced her bat mitzvah Torah portion with a tutor. Lily Ling's mother, Martha Goldstein, wiped away a tear as she watched her daughter.

"I'm starting to cry, listening to her sing the Hebrew," she said. Lily Ling's portion comes from the first book of the Bible, Genesis, meaning "birth," and this reminds Goldstein of her daughter's "rebirth," of "her coming here and becoming part of the Jewish community."

At home, Goldstein has hung three flags over the fireplace in the den, representing the United States, Israel and China. Goldstein is a single mother in her 50s, and she and her daughter celebrate three New Year holidays: American, Jewish and Chinese.

Lily Ling, who was adopted at age 4 in 1997, decided that for her bat mitzvah party she wanted a Chinese theme: a room decorated in red and gold, Chinese food, bamboo centerpieces and maybe some reference to the Year of the Monkey, in which she was born.

For girls like Lily Ling, being Jewish and Chinese means integrating different but complementary identities. The two go together, like yin and yang.

"I'm happy I'm Jewish, and I'm happy I'm Chinese," Lily Ling said. Goldstein, who works in development for a college preparatory school, credits her daughter's sense of belonging in the Jewish community to her synagogue's openness.

"Temple Isaiah believes that if your mother is Jewish, and you're raised as a Jew, then you are a Jew," she said.

Yet the question of whether a child adopted into a Jewish family will be universally accepted as Jewish frequently comes up in conversations with adoptive parents. Some see formal conversion as the answer.

These parents immerse their adopted children in the mikvah, a ritual bath, immediately upon returning from China. They may see the ceremony as the culmination of the adoption process. Or they consider it a way to legitimize the Jewish identity of their child, so that no other Jew will question it.

"I wanted to make them card-carrying Jews," said one mother who took her adopted daughters to the mikvah.

Other parents say they plan to perform conversion ceremonies before their daughters' bat mitzvahs, when the girls can actively participate in the ritual. Still others feel that no conversion is necessary.

Sari Steinberg, a 55-year-old social worker, "knew right away" that she would take her daughter to the mikvah after returning from China. At the ceremony, she passed out fortune cookies and mandel bread. "That's how we started our whole process of being both Chinese and Jewish," she said.

Steinberg, a single mother, and her daughter, Molly, now 10, celebrate Jewish and Chinese holidays "equally."

But sometimes, something has got to give. Molly used to take Chinese lessons, but as her schedule grew busier, she stopped going. Still, twice a week, Molly goes to Hebrew school, where she sits beside another Molly, who was also adopted from China on the same day.

Jews have adopted a significant number of children from China, in the view of some professionals in the adoption community.

"It would appear that a lot of Jewish families are adopting Asian children," said Marcia Jindal, an intercountry adoption coordinator for Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services in Los Angeles.

Jindal estimated that two out of 10 adoptions of Chinese children, facilitated by her agency, involved Jewish families.

Jews adopt children from China for the same reasons others do, experts say. Women might be single or older or unable to give birth. China has many infants available for adoption, and the wait time has remained relatively short, typically about a year.

Some families choose to adopt a girl, and China allows families to specify gender, Jindal said. And Chinese children have a reputation for being healthy, she added. Beth Hall, co-author of *Inside Transracial Adoption* (Perspectives Press, 2000), said it takes a certain type of person to adopt a child of another ethnicity.

"The kind of people who adopt transracially tend to be people who feel that they don't have to keep up with the Joneses," Hall said. "They can act outside the bounds of what might be 'normal' or 'OK' and get away with it, not have it ruin their ability to earn an income, to find happiness."

Jews may bring an extra sensitivity to the table, Hall added.

"If they've experienced anti-Semitism, they may be able to understand what it's like to experience racism in the way that a white gentile wouldn't," she said. Kirsten Hanson-Press, a 39-year-old adoption advocate in Los Angeles with a 2-year-old Chinese daughter, said she adopted from China after having adopted a Hispanic daughter. She wanted another child from a different culture.

"Jews often feel an alliance with people of color," Hanson-Press said. "We have an affinity for the 'other.'"

Already, Hanson-Press has had to choose between sending her daughter to Chinese school or Hebrew school. She opted for Hebrew school. "My daughters would first identify as Jewish and secondly as Hispanic and Chinese," she said.

Still, Hanson-Press acknowledged that she worries about the future. How will her children react, for example, when they learn that many, perhaps most, Jews follow the tradition of matrilineal descent--that is, they consider a person automatically Jewish only if their birth mother is Jewish.

Hanson-Press recently requested a meeting with the religious school principal to talk about how to support her children should others question their Jewishness.

Leslie Carter, who has a 2-year-old Chinese daughter, also expects challenges.

"Everybody is very welcoming now," said Carter, a 46-year-old director of business development who attends a Chabad in San Diego. "How people would feel if she was older and their son wanted to marry her, I couldn't say."

Carter recognizes that at some point, her daughter could "opt out of being Jewish, but she couldn't opt out of being Chinese."

Parents and children must reckon with this reality, said Jane Brown, an adoption expert who travels the country staging workshops for children. Brown has eight kids of her own, including five adopted from Asia.

"Nobody in the world is going to look at that [adopted Asian] child and see her first as Jewish," Brown said. "That's the part they can shed if they want to. They can't shed race."

Ultimately, it may be adult adoptees from South Korea, which has long allowed international adoption, who offer the best glimpse into the future for Chinese children and their families.

Julia Mendelson, a 23-year-old Korean adoptee, went to Jewish day school in New York from preschool through high school. She spent summers at Camp Young Judea. After high school, she lived in Israel for a year.

But Mendelson remembers feeling different. When she would catch a glimpse of herself in the mirror as she dressed for synagogue, she recalls, her reflection would startle her. Surrounded by Caucasians, "you picture yourself as one of them," she said.

Her parents invested tremendous effort trying to persuade her that she should be Jewish first, Mendelson said. They reminded her that her adoptive father's parents were Holocaust survivors. On a trip to Israel, her parents took her to an Ethiopian refugee camp to demonstrate that Jews were a diverse people.

But Mendelson had a hard time feeling "Jewish first," because "in society, you're Asian first."

Mendelson recalls the turning point, when she saw herself as others see her. It was the day of her bat mitzvah, after the service, when she overheard a cousin say, "It just looks so wrong to see an Asian kid reading Torah."

That moment "woke me up from denial," Mendelson said. Before, Judaism had felt natural. Afterward, she said, "I remember thinking how weird this must be for everybody here."

After Mendelson started college, she began dating a Catholic Korean adoptee--a situation that has caused tension between her and her parents. She would ideally like to marry a Jewish Korean, she said. But if she had to choose between Jewish and Korean, she would probably pick Korean.

"I feel strong enough in my Jewish identity ... to pass it on to my children. I feel like I could handle that part," she said. "But I feel like I can't handle educating my kids about being Korean."

Adoptive parents, like all parents, are often unaware of the struggles their children face. Cynthia Goldberg, a 53-year-old vocational counselor in Davis, only recently learned that her 18-year-old Korean daughter experienced racial taunting growing up.

"We were talking about elementary school the other day," Goldberg said, "and she told me about kids making fun of her face, saying that it was flat, that her glasses wouldn't stay up because she had a funny nose."

"I said, 'You never told me that.' And she said, 'Why would I tell you? You wouldn't have been able to do anything about it.' ... It's not about how you raise them," Goldberg concluded. "It's about how the world sees them."

As for Leah, the coming-of-age Chinese teenager--the former baby by the riverbank--when the world tells her, as it often does, "You don't look Jewish," she has a ready answer.

"It's not about looking. It's just something you are," she says. A couple of years ago, Leah went back to China, to the riverbank where the villagers found her. Being there reminded her of Moses, whose mother set him adrift on the Nile River rather than drown him, as Pharaoh had commanded.

"I thought, that's kind of like me," she said. Like Moses, Leah has a special connection to the Jewish people. Only "I'm hoping," she added, "I won't have to lead people across the Red Sea."



Sarah Price Brown is a freelance writer in Los Angeles. She can be reached at sarahpricebrown@gmail.com.

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Guide to Birth Ceremonies for Interfaith Families

Pages 1-3. To read the rest of the document, download the [Guide to Birth Ceremonies for Interfaith Families](#) (PDF). Also available in [Word](#) format. Download requires login.

"This is really a wonderful document. You all should be commended for producing it."

-Rabbi Arthur Nemitoff, The Temple, Congregation B'nai Jehudah, Overland Park, Kansas

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Introduction

We at InterfaithFamily.com compiled the Guide to Birth Ceremonies for Interfaith Families as a way to help interfaith families navigate the process of planning a birth ceremony. It includes detailed information about what takes place at a brit milah, simchat bat or naming ceremony, as well as information on ways a child's interfaith family can participate in the ceremony.

The booklet opens with background information on birth ceremonies in the Jewish tradition, including information on special concerns for interfaith families. It continues with sample sequences for birth ceremonies and concludes with a wide array of sample readings, prayers and rituals to include in your child's birth ceremony.

We could not have created this resource without the help of our devoted readers and contributors, who responded to our call in August 2006 for suggestions for birth ceremonies.

We would like to thank the following contributors (authors whose work originally appeared in another source include the name of the original publication):

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Introduction to The Bris (Brit Milah)

According to traditional Jewish practice, on the eighth day after a boy is born, he is circumcised, that is, the foreskin is removed from the tip of his penis, and several blessings are recited. This ritual, called brit milah (commonly known as a bris), was first mentioned in the Torah (the Hebrew Bible), when God says, "Every male among you shall be circumcised... it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you" (Genesis 17:11). The brit milah may be postponed, however, if the child is not healthy enough to undergo the procedure.

According to traditional Judaism, there is a difference between circumcision and a brit milah. A brit milah must be performed by an observant Jew who follows a prescribed procedure. A brit milah is typically performed by a mohel, who is a Jew trained in religious law and surgical techniques. For many years there were only Orthodox mohels, but now there are a growing number of progressive mohels who are receptive to the needs of interfaith families. The Reform movement maintains a database of mohels at <http://www.beritmila.org>. Often, parents will ask their rabbi, if they have one, to co-officiate at the brit milah.

The brit milah may occur in any location that will allow it, and usually occurs in the parents' home or a synagogue, although it is certainly permissible to perform the ceremony in the hospital.

The basic order of the ceremony is as follows:

1. An honored woman (the kvatterin) brings the infant forward and hands him to an honored man (the kvatter).

2. The kvatter places the infant on the knees of the already-seated sandek (another honored person, usually the grandfather).
3. The sandek holds the infant while the mohel performs the circumcision.
4. As the circumcision is performed, the mohel recites a blessing declaring that his act fulfills a holy commandment. (See Mohel's Blessing, page 16.)
5. The parents recite a blessing acknowledging that their son has entered into a covenant, or contract, between God and the Jewish people. (See Parents' Blessing, page 16)
6. The boy's Hebrew name is formally bestowed over a cup of wine (See Kiddush (Blessing over wine), page 36).

Many parents and mohels add additional readings, songs and rituals to the basic ceremony.

Mohels are typically very accommodating to a family's needs and will use anesthetic if desired and will help the parents find ways to add additional elements to ceremony. It is customary for mohels to charge a fee of several hundred dollars for their services, and if you need to bring in a mohel from out-of-town, you are expected to pay for their transportation and lodging. The mohel will provide precise...

To read the rest of the document, download the [Guide to Birth Ceremonies for Interfaith Families](#) (PDF). Also available in [Word](#) format. Download requires login.



Micah Sachs is the online managing editor of InterfaithFamily.com.

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NPR Host Scott Simon: Riding on Airwaves

By Jeff Rubin

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October 18, 2006

Photographs of his wife and daughter compete for scarce shelf space in the cramped office of National Public Radio broadcaster Scott Simon. Simon points to a shot of his wife, Caroline, and adopted Asian daughter, Elise, in a restaurant in Munich. His daughter looks every bit the proper Bavarian girl in her knitted German sweater.

"Some of the diners asked us what we were doing in Munich," Simon relates. "My wife told them that we were in Germany to research my next novel which will be set in Dachau. She explained that this is a very important subject to us because 'We are a Jewish family.' Well, their eyes widened and I thought their jaws were about to hit the table. They just did not know what to make of us, this French woman with an American husband and Asian daughter. They never saw anything like it."

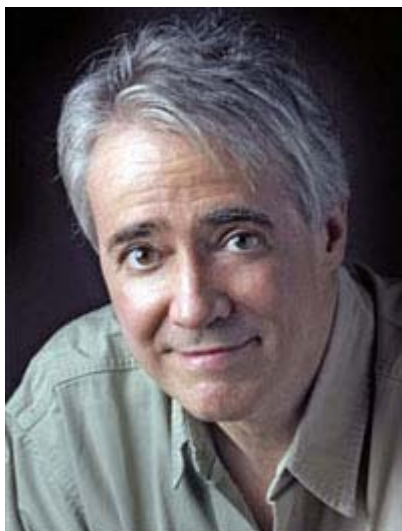


Photo © Will O'Leary 2005

Being a Jewish family is very much on the mind, and the broadcasts, of Simon these days. On a recent program, Simon offered a [commentary](#) on raising a Jewish-Chinese child. "My daughter's Chinese class was cancelled last week because of the Jewish holiday. Only in America," he began.

Simon does not hesitate to discuss his life on his weekly show, "Weekend Edition Saturday." It's a part of the personal, engaging, descriptive style that sets his reporting and his show apart. The winner of numerous awards, Simon joined NPR in 1977 as chief of its Chicago bureau and has anchored "Weekend Edition Saturday" since 1986. As of Arbitron fall 2005, the program is on 606 public radio stations across the country and has a weekly listenership of more than 4 million.

The show is a blend of news, commentary and features that seem perfectly paced for relaxed, weekend listening. "We have to report breaking news ... but we can take a broader

perspective on events that is a little bit more long-lasting," Simon explains.

Children's writer and illustrator Daniel Pinkwater, a frequent "Weekend Edition" guest, describes Simon as "without question the best-liked person on NPR, admired and looked up to by his professional colleagues and trusted by the audience. He is as nice a guy as he seems to be on the air."

With a career that has spanned decades and continents, a slew of professional awards to his credit, and three books under his belt, is there one particularly rewarding story or moment that validated his decision to enter journalism?

"Fortunately that happens every now and again," Simon responds.

But pushed to choose, he mentions NPR's decision to assign the "Weekend Edition Saturday" staff to do its overnight coverage of the attacks of September 11.

"Overnight coverage was particularly important then because there were so many people who had taken to the roads because airplanes had stopped flying," he said. "And just the terrible hurt that we sustained as a nation--I think a lot of people were looking for that kind of companionship and I'm glad that we were there. We also did a totally live, six-hour show on Saturday that I think was one of the greatest things that we ever did on this network."

Simon would not encourage students to follow him into radio journalism, or any other career, for that matter.

"I don't want to give out career advice," he says. "I do think it's important to find something you can do that you enjoy doing, that you can believe in, and that has worth for people. When you find it, the work will seem like work but it will rarely seem like drudgery. You will be able to learn from everything that happens to you, even your mistakes. You will feel a sense of commitment to what you do, which I think is irreplaceable and energizing. You will feel proud of what you do and of your life."

He is equally reluctant to single out just one "meaningful Jewish experience." However, one Seder provided a revelatory moment. "It was just a few days after we brought home our daughter from China. We were reading the story of the Exodus and thinking about Moses, the little boy cast aside in the bulrushes. Looking at our little girl, it was just more powerfully emotional than I can state. You realize all over again that this story is not for one time and place but it's for eternity. These stories keep happening all around us and our little girl is a part of it."

Simon fears the day when his daughter will ask why all the adopted Chinese children are girls. "How do you explain a society that casts away young women?" he asks. "We want her to understand that Judaism teaches that you cast away no one, that the entire community cares for everyone."

Simon values Judaism's devotion to social justice. "So much of Judaism is taken up with the notion of social justice, of tikkun olam, that we are all supposed to be a healing influence ... We want our daughter to grow up with a sense of responsibility for the world that Judaism fosters, the sense that she is a citizen of the world and is not just a passenger who can sit back."

The Simons will raise their daughter with a deep exposure to both her Jewish heritage and her Chinese heritage. "I want her to take occasional trips to China and to Israel," he says. "Which is not to say that some day when she is 11, she won't walk in to us and say that she wants to be Wiccan," he laughs.

Growing up as the child of a Catholic mother and Jewish father, Simon is no stranger to straddling cultural identities. "I have an instinctive acceptance of it," he says. "I grew up with a dual identity and I never felt as a human being that I needed to choose one identity over the other."

He is reminded of his Jewish identity very often when he receives complaint calls from listeners: "Inevitably, whenever I get the most disgusting, obscene, over-the-top complaints from listeners, easily 90 percent of them are anti-Semitic."

Anti-Semitism is something he has witnessed throughout his reporting career. He recently explained to a young Indian intern in his office that the world has been unsuccessful in eliminating anti-Semitism and that Israel is the one place that provides a refuge for Jews, no questions asked.

"It's an escape hatch that the world needs, still, alas," he says. "This is one thing that I understand because I have traveled all around the world, and I think it's important."

In his recent commentary, Simon empathized with the parents of Sen. George Allen and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright who experienced the epitome of Jew-hatred, the Holocaust, and who chose to keep their Jewish identity hidden from their children.

Now a parent himself, Simon made a different choice: "I live with a father's dread of that day some fool will hurl a racial insult at our daughter on the soccer field. But if and when that happens, I hope she'll score a goal and turn around and shout, 'And you know what? I'm Jewish too!'"



Jeff Rubin is the publisher of *Hillel Campus Report*.

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Cheese Blintzes: An Adoptee Discovers Her Jewish Roots

By Dina Beach Lynch

The gray fireproof box stood on the top shelf of my parents' closet. For most of my childhood my parents warned me never to touch the gray box. It was important because it held "the important papers," the ones for my parents' eyes only.

Finally, at the ripe old age of twenty-seven I was going to be able to look in the box. I was getting married and needed my baptismal certificate for the Catholic ceremony. I slowly leafed through the files: old insurance policies, school records, birth certificates, final adoption decree--all the makings of bureaucracy and milestones in our lives. Little did I know that the gray box would answer more mysteries, such as why I adored cheese blintzes, loved the sight of yarmulkes, felt oddly humbled by hearing the Sh'ma, a Jewish prayer, sung, and secretly dreamed of converting to Judaism.

I opened the file and examined the adoption paperwork out of lawyerly professional curiosity. I was fascinated by the onion-skin paper, knowing that someone had to re-type the entire page for any mistake. The language was formal, serious and confusing. I had trouble understanding some parts. But there was no mistaking this phrase--"This child is Jewish but shall be placed with a black Catholic family. The birthmother requests that the child be raised as a Jew." The mystery was solved. I was a black Jew.

I had found out I was adopted when I was twelve when a nosy nurse asked my horrified mother if her other child was adopted, too. My younger sister was my parents' birth child, and I had thought I was, too, until that day. The news was a relief because I really wasn't like anyone else in the family. Not only did I look different, but I often felt out of place. Knowing that I was adopted put some framework on the feelings and thoughts I couldn't reconcile with my parents' life.



As I learned more details about my birth, my adoptive parents were slow to acknowledge the new information. My mom said, "You're still my girl," as if to imply one small piece of paper couldn't undermine the years of the Catholic ritual and dogma that branded me her own. My dad simply felt angry that someone who chose to give away a child would presume to dictate the details of her upbringing. Neither parent wanted to discuss the facts surrounding my birth or encourage me to pursue Judaism. For me to explore my Jewish

background seemed like a repudiation of all that they were and all that they had given to me.

Adoption is a wonderful thing; it joins a child to a family. It satisfies a basic need to love and be loved. However, it also creates such ambiguity. The simplest questions--like who am I--can't be easily answered. Although I loved my adoptive parents, I craved a sense of belonging and definiteness then, and to a lesser extent, now. Knowing that my birthmother had wanted me to be raised Jewish felt like proof that I did belong to something, to someone.

Eventually, I learned that I had been adopted through the Louise Wise Agency, which had been and perhaps still is the largest Jewish adoption agency in New York City. My dad's boss, a Conservative Jew, had steered my parents to the agency. I wheedled the basic facts from my adoptive mom: my birthmother, a white Jewish woman, came from a prominent family in New York and had been involved with a Nigerian man. (Hence, my exotic looks.) My adoptive mom had been offered a profile of my birth parents at the beginning of the adoption, but she had declined more information, fearing violent circumstances were connected to my birth.

A five-year intermittent search for my birth parents brought me to the very counselor who had placed my adoption on her last day at work before retirement. As we chatted on the phone she sounded interested as I recounted my life and all its blessings: good childhood, loving parents, successful career as an attorney, married with two gorgeous, healthy babies. When I asked about the facts surrounding my birth, I was told that New York law doesn't permit adoptees to have any data beyond basic non-identifying information. I told her I wanted to find my birthmother and to reconnect to my Jewishness. "Why?" she asked. "Why stir up all this trouble when you could easily forget and be happy?" Then I was told that I was a foundling without any identifiable family. That didn't ring true for me, and maybe one day I will investigate further.

I decided to embrace my Jewish heritage and learn about it. The emphasis on family, free will and partnership with HaShem, or God, pleases my mind and my heart. Study unites me emotionally and culturally with my birthmother, as I imagine she studied the same words I now ponder. With my dark brown skin and long black dreadlocks, I certainly don't look Jewish. However, I am a Jew. I am completely a Jew. I have always been attracted to and comforted by Jewish life and I believe that Judaism can give me a context for living a life that is satisfying intellectually and spiritually.

Things have a way of working themselves out. I did marry in a Catholic ceremony to please my Irish Catholic husband and to honor his cousin, a priest who performed the ceremony. During our marriage my husband supported my choice to observe Judaism. Although we have since divorced, he remains supportive and active. He takes the kids to Jewish Sunday School and is learning how to participate in a Jewish household.

There has been much joy in my journey to become a learned Jew, particularly because I became B'nai Mitzvah (accepted the privileges and obligations of an adult Jew) last year. I topped off years of self-study with two vigorous years of Hebrew, prayers and cantillation instruction so I could stand on the bimah, or pulpit, chant the Torah and become a woman---like my mother. My children, too, embrace their Jewishness by participating in Shabbat services and Hebrew school. My adoptive mom now kvells, or swells with pride, over her Jewish daughter. I now mentor those who are "newly Jewish."

There was also sadness along the way. I lost my beloved dad. Many rabbis were suspicious of my journey. Many Jews I met doubted that I was really a Jew, including my own rabbi who insisted I undergo conversion. Conversion was hurtful to me not because it would make me less of a Jew, but rather because it seemed to deny my connection to my birthmother.

Adoptees, like Jews, understand the importance of connection. And, nothing can change that sense of peace and belonging I feel as my voice blends with my fellow congregants' voices to sing "Shema Israel Adonai eloheinu. Adonai e chad Baruch shem kevod malchuto le olam vaed." We are one.

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