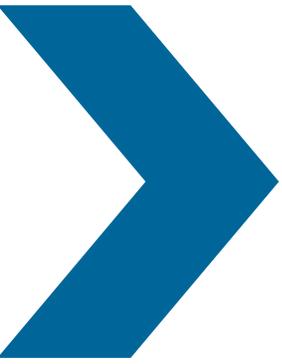


Adoption
& Jewish
Identity Project



12 THINGS
JEWISH ADOPTEES AND
THEIR FAMILIES WISH THEIR
COMMUNITIES KNEW



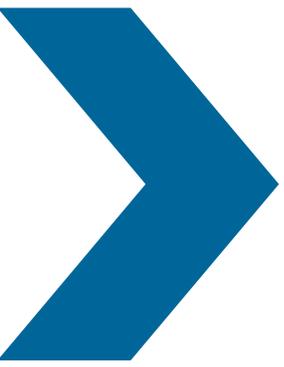
DID YOU KNOW?

- **American Jews adopt at about twice the rate of the general population.**
- **Only a tiny minority of children adopted by Jewish families today were born to Jewish parents.**
- **The majority of Jewish adoptive families today cross boundaries of identity such as race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion.**

Although approximately 5% of American Jewish families have an adopted child and the majority of American Jews have a close connection to adoption, adoption has been largely missing from the communal agenda. To help our communities better understand the Jewish adoptive experience, the advisory board and directors of the Adoption & Jewish Identity Project (AJIP) offer this list (with a hat-tip to Sherrie Eldridge's important book *Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Parents Knew*). While not all of these "things" will apply to all adoptees or adoptive families, keeping them in mind will go a long way toward making this growing population feel truly at home in our communities.

The mission of the Adoption & Jewish Identity Project is to support Jewish adoptees and their families in creating healthy personal, family, and communal identities and to advocate for an inclusive Jewish community that is fully welcoming to adoptees.

Find the ["12 Things" User Guide](#) on the [Resources](#) page of the [AJIP website](#)!



ADOPTEE VOICES

- 1 We don't arrive in our families as "blank slates"; we come from someone and somewhere. Our identities are multi-faceted and evolve over time.** We each have a background, a past, and another family - all often quite different from those of our adoptive families and communities. Sometimes members of our first families are part of our lives; even if they're not, they may be present in our hearts and minds. Our interest in exploring who we are and where we came from is healthy and normal. Although one aspect of our identities may come to the fore at any given time, we should never feel we need to choose between them.
- 2 Whether we share our stories is up to us.** Too often we aren't in control of when and how our stories get told, especially when we're children. Taking ownership of our lives entails learning that our stories are private (although not secret or shameful) and that we don't owe anyone an explanation just because they're curious. We are more likely to talk openly with people with whom we have genuine relationships and who understand the importance of respectful language in talking about adoption. It can be deeply painful when people ask why our first parents "gave us away" or how much our parents "paid for us."
- 3 Our families of origin may have a place in our Jewish lives.** For those of us in open adoptions, you may see members of our birth families at holidays and major milestones. Even those of us not in direct contact with our first families may choose to acknowledge them at Jewish occasions, such as bar/bat/b'nai mitzvahs and weddings. Although we recognize that congregational and denominational practices vary, it's important to us that our communities think as inclusively as possible within their particular norms.

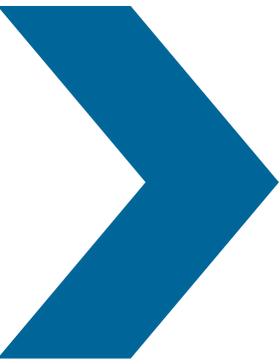
Even with an Orthodox conversion & countless hours of learning a third language, Hebrew, people still questioned if I was Jewish enough.

(White, same-race adoptee from Russia)



I get that all the time. What ARE you?
(Jewish adoptee of color)

- 4 Role models are key to developing a strong sense of self and belonging.** It's validating when we see ourselves mirrored in the faces and lives around us; it makes it easier to feel a part of the Jewish community and to imagine our futures within it. Those of us who are adoptees of color need to see faces of color in our communities, and it's helpful for all of us to know there are other Jewish adopted people around us. Younger adoptees need role models, and adults need each other as sources of support and solidarity.
- 5 For many of us not born to Jewish parents, our non-Jewish backgrounds are an important part of our Jewish stories.** When communities acknowledge that the Jewish people have incorporated members of other groups from our earliest times (think of some of the mothers of the 12 Tribes), it validates our belonging and gives us more confidence to talk about the non-Jewish parts of our stories. Conversely, when the Jewish community treats non-Jews as "other," it can be painful for those of us who have a natural sense of connection with non-Jewish relatives, and can even make us question whether we ourselves truly belong.
- 6 Jewish history and ancestry can be complicated for us.** A sense of shared ancestry has always been central to how Jews think and talk about themselves, yet those of us not "born Jewish" often question how we fit into this picture. We may wonder about our biological ancestors, even worrying they might have been "on the wrong side" of historical events. We tend to feel a greater sense of belonging when the Jewish history we learn goes beyond the Eastern European immigration story and allows us to see ourselves as one of many diverse streams that feed into the American Jewish community.



ADOPTIVE PARENT VOICES

- 7 Our families are complicated, but they are also normal.** The formation of any family creates complex new networks. Yours may include in-laws or a step-family. Ours include our children's birth families, whether or not we see them regularly or even know them. Most of the time our lives are like everyone else's. Treat us like any family in today's increasingly diverse Jewish world, while still being sensitive to unique challenges adoptees and their families may face.
- 8 Our families tend to feel most comfortable in Jewish communities that allow us to come as we are.** We feel more genuinely part of our communities when they support our efforts to incorporate our children's birth families and/or heritages into our lives. And our children's Jewish identities are likely to grow stronger when they feel free to explore and express other facets of their identities. We and our children often devote considerable effort to searching out and working to create such diverse and inclusive Jewish communities.
- 9 Don't make assumptions about Jewish identity based on appearance.** If you see people in a Jewish space, doing Jewish things, assume they're Jewish and don't ask "How are you Jewish?" Conversely, don't assume someone isn't Jewish just because they're black, Asian, Latinx, or blond and blue-eyed. As a community, we need to embrace our diversity. From the bimah, in our classrooms and youth groups, and on the walls of our Jewish institutions, communal leaders need to reinforce the reality that there are many ways of "looking Jewish."

Our son was treated, at times, as exotic and "different," when he desperately wanted to be just one of the kids. He went from being proud of being Jewish to distancing himself from it.
(White adoptive mother of a multiracial son)

- 10 Conversion raises profound questions.** As one of the most consequential Jewish decisions most of us face as adoptive parents, conversion is complicated by denominational differences and personal beliefs. Some of us feel our children are Jewish simply by being part of our families; others believe they must be converted according to Jewish law if they were born to non-Jewish mothers. Our children grapple with the consequences of our decisions, which may impact their feelings of identity and belonging, relationships with life partners, status in Israel, and acceptance by some segments of the Jewish community.
- 11 There's no “one size fits all” approach to adoption.** Our families are formed through different kinds of adoption – domestic and international, same-race and transracial, open and closed. Our children came to us at different ages and from different circumstances, bringing their own personalities, interests, histories, and families. They have a range of feelings about being adopted and varying degrees of interest in their birth families and heritages, feelings that often change over time. What you know about one adoptee's or adoptive family's experiences may not necessarily apply to others.
- 12 In order for our children to feel fully at home, we need to acknowledge and confront the racism, white privilege, and Ashkenazi-centrism within the Jewish community.** Much remains to be done to dismantle harmful attitudes and stereotypes that persist in our own midst. Jews of Color experience racism within our own communities; non-Ashkenazi Jews regularly encounter the presumption that Ashkenazi history and ancestry are the norm. Seeing our fellow Jews working to eradicate destructive stereotypes and embrace the diversity within our communities makes our families feel supported and validated.

I am far more aware of the struggles of non-white and non-Ashkenazi Jews to be included in the mainstream. I am more sensitive to racial issues and “white privilege” in general.
(White adoptive mother of daughter from Guatemala)

JOIN US!

Many groups – including adoptees, LGBTQ Jews, Jews of Color, Jews by choice, members of interfaith families, and Jews with disabilities – often find themselves on the margins of the Jewish community because they are seen as “different.” As members of adoptive families, we invite you to join us in listening to all of these voices as we work to create a fully inclusive Jewish community.



Find the [“12 Things” User Guide](#) on the [Resources](#) page of the [AJIP website](#)!



Join us at:

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www.adoptionandjewishidentity.org

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