

# Boundaries of Identity

## *Jewish Families in an Era of Transnational, Transracial, and Open Adoption*

Jennifer **Sartori** and Jayne K. **Guberman**

*“I wasn’t sure whether other people would even consider me Jewish, even though, to me, it was all I had ever identified as. I felt slightly betrayed in some instances by the Jewish community when faced with Orthodox members telling me I wasn’t truly Jewish, even though I had never met my birth mother and I had been adopted at 3 days old. I felt like they were telling me that my mom, my mother who raised me, was not my real mother and that I didn’t belong in the community.”*

—White, domestically adopted woman (AJIP, 2103)

*“The sentiment, ‘If you’re Black, you can’t be Jewish,’ came up several times, including at [Jewish camp] and at Sunday School. Our son was treated, at times, as an exotic animal, when he desperately wanted to be one of the kids. He went from being proud of being Jewish to distancing himself from it.”*

—White Jewish adoptive mother of a multiracial son (AJIP, 2010–2012)

Jewish identity—never a simple phenomenon—can be especially complex for adoptive families. What impact does having been born to non-Jewish birth parents have on an adoptee’s experiences within the Jewish community? What is it like to be a Jew of color raised by white parents in a largely white Jewish population? How do Jewish communities respond when adoptive parents incorporate elements of their children’s birth heritages into their lives? These questions have become increasingly pressing in recent decades, as not only have growing numbers of Jews created their families through adoption but adoption itself has been transformed by the expansion of transnational, transracial, transcultural, and open adoptions.

Despite the rapid growth of this sector of American Jewry, there has been little systematic research about adoption in the Jewish community. In 2009, we initiated the Adoption & Jewish Identity Project, with the goal of improving the lives of Jewish adoptees and their families by creating broader understanding of the unique religious, cultural, and identity issues they face. To facilitate this goal, we are gathering qualitative and quantitative information from those who have lived this experience: Jewish adoptive parents and young adult adoptees.

This article explores the experiences of contemporary American Jewish adoptive families based primarily on the results of a survey we conducted of

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*Dr. Jennifer Sartori and Dr. Jayne Guberman are co-directors of the Adoption & Jewish Identity Project. Sartori earned her Ph.D. in History from Emory University and currently serves as Associate Director of Jewish Studies at Northeastern University, where she teaches courses on modern Jewish history, gender and Jewish culture, and adoption in the contemporary United States. Guberman holds a Ph.D. in Folklore & Folklife from the University of Pennsylvania. An independent scholar and oral history consultant, she recently directed an oral history of the Boston Marathon bombings for Northeastern University and WBUR public radio. Both Sartori and Guberman are adoptive mothers.*



American Jewish adoptive parents.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the data show that the trend toward adopting across boundaries of identity—common in the American population as a whole—is strikingly more pronounced in the American Jewish community. At the same time, Jewish identity often complicates parents' attitudes and practices regarding the active incorporation of adoptees' birth heritages into their family and community life.

### TRENDS IN ADOPTION IN THE UNITED STATES

In the mid-20th century, the reigning paradigm in adoption was “matching”: matching children with prospective adoptive parents so as to create families that could pass as “natural” (Gill, 2004).<sup>2</sup> Adoption experts believed adoptive families would be more “authentic,” and thus successful, if they resembled biological ones, in terms not only of appearance but also personality, intellectual ability, and religion. Most adoptions were of white newborns; children of color and older children were often seen as “unadoptable.” Ties between children and their birth families were generally cut completely, and all members of the adoption triad (adoptive parents, adoptees, and birth parents) were supposed to act as if adoption had never happened.<sup>3</sup>

By the end of the 20th century, the easy availability of birth control, the legalization of abortion, and the growing acceptance of single motherhood had caused the number of healthy white American newborns available for adoption to plummet. In response, the definition of “adoptable children” expanded to include children from other countries, children of color, children with special needs, and older children in foster care. Paralleling these transformations was a paradigm shift in attitudes toward adoption. Not only did secrecy become impossible to maintain in many cases, but awareness grew of the importance of personal roots, whether biological, ethnic, or historical. The previous attitude that an adoptee who craved information about or contact with his or her birth family and heritage was maladjusted gave way to a sense that such a need is naturally and deeply ingrained in all humans.<sup>4</sup> Today's adoptions increasingly involve some level of contact between birth and adoptive families, and adoptive parents are strongly encouraged to foster connections to their children's heritages and communities of origin.

Approximately 80,000 non-stepparent adoptions occur in the United States each year. Contrary to popular assumption, the majority—approximately 69%—are public adoptions from foster care; only 19% are domestic infant adoptions and about 11% are international adoptions. Approximately 40% of adoptions today are transracial and/or transethnic, including the vast majority of international adoptions, as well as smaller but still substantial percentages of foster care and domestic infant adoptions.

<sup>1</sup>Close to 1,000 people responded to the survey, yielding 789 usable responses. Because the survey spread virally, the results are not necessarily representative of all Jewish adoptive families; in particular, respondents were overwhelmingly female, younger than average, and may be more strongly identified Jewishly than the norm. However, the sample in many ways resembles the broader American Jewish population, and we believe the data yield valuable information regarding Jewish adoptive families.

<sup>2</sup>For the history of adoption in the United States, see, among many others, Carp (2004), Herman (2008), Melosh (2002), and Pertman (2011).

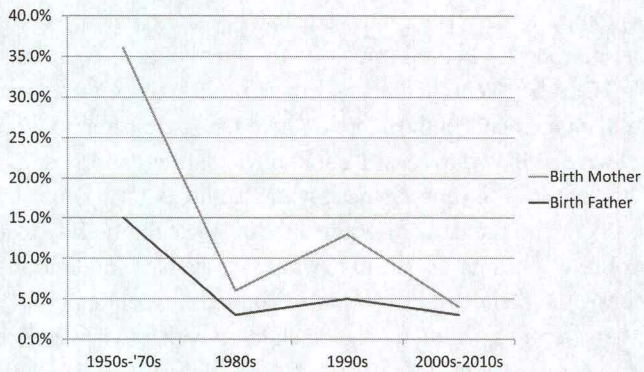
<sup>3</sup>On the development of the practices of severing ties between birth and adoptive families, sealing original birth certificates, and hiding adoption, see especially Carp (1998).

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, the many works of Lifton (1975; 1994; 1998); See also contemporary works written for adoptive parents, including, among many others, Eldridge (1999); MacLeod and MacRae (2006); and TeBos and Woodwyk (2007).



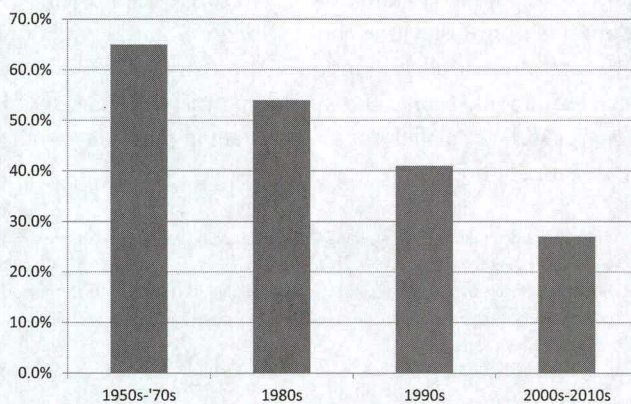
**TRENDS IN JEWISH ADOPTION IN THE UNITED STATES**

How do Jews fit into these trends? American Jews adopt at approximately twice the rate of non-Jews; in 2000, about 5% of Jewish households with children had an adopted child in the home, compared with 2.5% of American households overall (NJPS, 2001, pp. 4–5; see also Bleich, 2003, p. 5; U.S. Census, 2001).<sup>5</sup> Participants in our survey had adopted children between the 1950s and 2012, allowing us to track changes over time in the profile of Jewish adoptive families. Through the 1970s, white Jewish parents generally adopted white American newborns. Of these parents, 65% chose private domestic adoptions, 29% public adoptions from foster care, and 6% international adoptions. Moreover, many of their children had at least one Jewish birth parent: 36% had a Jewish birth mother, while 15% had a Jewish birth father.



**Figure 1.** Percentage of Jewish birth parents by decade of adoption.

The data then show a pronounced increase in adoptions across boundaries of identity, far more so than in the American population as a whole. As seen in Figure 1, in the early 2000s, only 4% of the adopted children had a Jewish birth mother and 3% had a Jewish birth father. By this period, transracial, transcultural, and transnational adoptions had become the norm. Figure 2 shows that the percentage of private domestic adoptions dropped steadily to 27% in the early 2000s. At the same time, the percentage of international adoptions increased dramatically—to 63% in the 2000s (see Figure 3).



**Figure 2.** Private domestic adoptions by decade.

<sup>5</sup>According to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, only 3% of Jewish families with children had an adopted child in the home (NJPS 1990, p. 16). Given that the percentage rose from 3% to 5% between the 1990 and 2000 surveys, the percentage may be even higher today, well over a decade later, although no reliable statistics exist.

***The percentage of nonwhite children adopted into Jewish families has steadily and dramatically increased.***



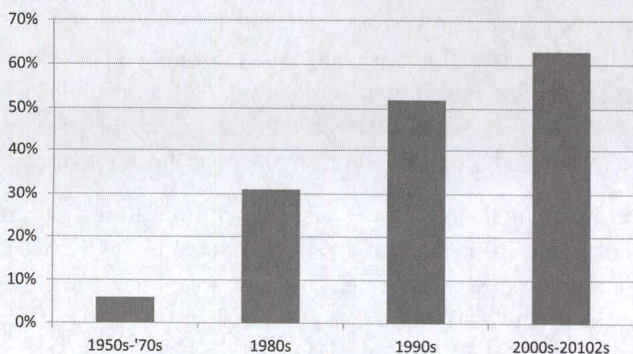


Figure 3. International adoptions by decade.

In a similar vein, the percentage of nonwhite children adopted into Jewish families has steadily and dramatically increased. All of the children adopted by respondents in the 1950s and '60s (admittedly a small number) were white. The percentage of white children then decreased every decade, to only 24% in the last few years (2010–12) (see Figure 4). Of the children adopted by the respondents between 2000 and 2012, 34% were white, 32% were Asian or Asian-mixed, 17% were Latino or Latino-mixed, and 15% were black or black-mixed (2% other). In sharp contrast, today only about 15% of adoptions in the broader American population are international and 40% of which are transracial.

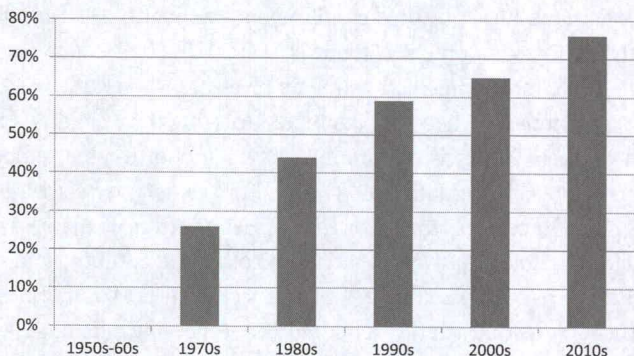


Figure 4. Transracial adoptions by decade.

### JEWISH FAMILIES' RESPONSES IN LIGHT OF CHANGING REALITIES

American Jews, then, are at the forefront of the trend toward crossing boundaries of identity in adoption. How have Jewish families responded to these developments, especially in light of prevailing “best practices” in adoption that emphasize active exploration and inclusion of an adoptee’s birth heritage? How do they negotiate the relationship between Jewishness and the adoptee’s birth heritage? Although for some Jewish adoptive families identity appears relatively unproblematic, many are indeed wrestling with the implications of their children’s and their families’ multiple and sometimes blended identities, whether the adoption is transracial or same race, international or domestic.

The issues are most obvious for Jewish adoptees of color and their families. These families face clear challenges: in particular, the deep-seated



***Jewish adoptees of color often find the authenticity of their identities as Jews questioned, even by members of their own communities.***

presumption—common to American Jews and non-Jews alike—that Jews are white, as well as the corrosive effects of ingrained racism in the Jewish community. Jewish adoptees of color often find the authenticity of their identities as Jews questioned, even by members of their own communities, or experience outright prejudice. Many adoptees and adoptive parents comment poignantly on these challenges:

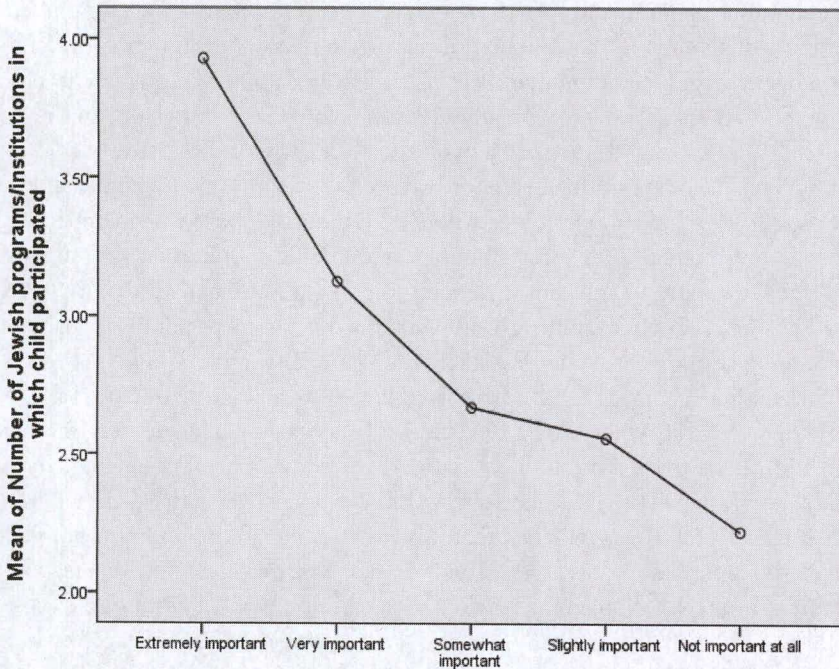
- A white adoptive mother of a daughter adopted from Korea reflects, “It is always assumed that she is not Jewish, and after a while she seemed to feel that they must know something she didn’t. It just wears her down when people always give her that ‘WOW! You’re Jewish?’ look” (AJIP, 2010–2012).
- A white adoptive mother of a transracially adopted child writes, “[A]t my former congregation, . . . some people even said non-white Jews ‘diluted’ the Jewish population” (AJIP, 2010–2012).
- A young Korean adoptee observes, “Most of the racism I have experienced was from within the Jewish community. My mom pulled me from Jewish pre-school before the second day was over, because the other kids refused to play with me. At JCC camp, others campers would make snide comments about me being a karate or kung-fu master, I never fit at Hebrew school, and was an outcast in my class for most of my middle and high school years” (AJIP, 2013).

Survey responses indicate just how hard it can be to raise a child to identify as Jewish while also incorporating the child’s birth heritage in substantive ways. “Institutionally and practically, it is very difficult,” reflected one respondent. “The FCC [Families with Children from China] celebrates Easter only; Sunday school/Hebrew school is at the same time as Chinese culture and Mandarin class. I will never be satisfied with the non-solution I have found” (AJIP, 2010–2012). Many of our survey respondents, moreover, commented on the ambivalent response they received from their Jewish communities when they attempted to bring their children’s birth heritages into their lives. “The Jewish community is very supportive, but somewhat from a distance,” remarked one respondent. “They still project, of course, that Jewish education takes precedence over other choices (i.e., Hebrew over Vietnamese, of course, which is a difficult choice, and VERY hard to do both!!) But admiring and supportive in tone” (AJIP, 2010–2012). Still others experience communal authorities as disapproving of their efforts to teach their children about their birth heritages. As one respondent commented, “[Our] rabbi, who is otherwise welcoming to my children, has discouraged pursuit of Chinese learning, as he would rather see them identify primarily as Jews. I don’t see why they can’t pursue both” (AJIP, 2010–2012).

Despite these challenges, many respondents who adopted transracially and/or transnationally are in fact devoting considerable attention to incorporating elements of their children’s birth heritages into their family lives. Yet given the Jewish community’s concerns about the continuity of Jewish identity, it is perhaps not surprising that many Jewish adoptive families struggle to blend or balance Jewish and birth heritage in their everyday lives, and many find themselves—consciously or unconsciously—prioritizing one over the other. The more important respondents said that Jewish identity was in their initial thinking about adoption, the more Jewish socialization practices and the fewer birth heritage socialization practices they tended to report engaging in later. Only one-quarter of respondents reported behaviors that indicated an equal emphasis on both Jewish identity and birth heritage, with more than half emphasizing either one or the other (see Figures 5 and 6).

***Many Jewish adoptive families struggle to blend or balance Jewish and birth heritage in their everyday lives.***

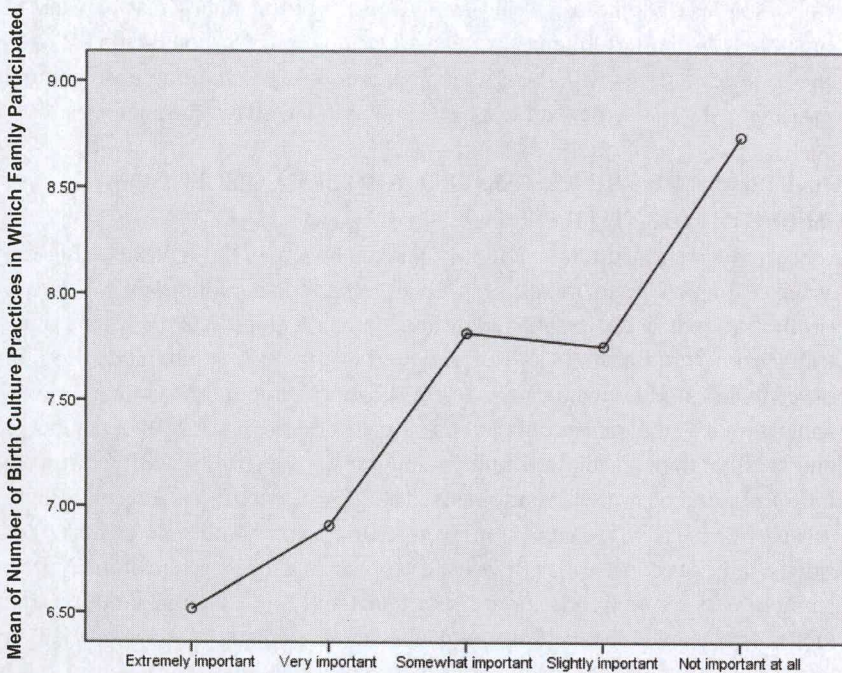




**As you considered and then made decisions about adoption, how important were issues of Jewish identity in your thinking?**

Figure 5. Importance of Jewish identity and number of Jewish practices.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the Jewish community can also provide a more welcoming and supportive environment for adoptees of color. The Jewish people has always been more racially and ethnically diverse than Americans



**As you considered and then made decisions about adoption, how important were issues of Jewish identity in your thinking?**

Figure 6. Importance of Jewish identity and number of birth culture practices.



commonly recognize, and this diversity has only increased as growing numbers of individuals of color have joined the Jewish community through conversion and/or marriage. Many multiracial Jewish adoptive families report how important it is to them to connect with other Jews of color, often through organizations such as the Jewish Multiracial Network or Be'chol Lashon (see the article by Tobin and Weinberg in this issue), or by specifically seeking out congregations, schools, camps, and youth groups with a critical mass of nonwhite members.

Many parents who choose a same-race, domestic adoption do so assuming they will not have to confront the complicated issues of blended identity faced by transracial adoptive families. Indeed, among our survey respondents, parents of same-race adoptees are far less likely than parents of children of color to see their children as having a birth heritage different from their own (close to 50% say their child does not have a different birth heritage, while another 10% are unsure). Even those who do identify their children as having a different birth heritage overwhelmingly do not see it as important to bring that heritage into their lives; a full 97% responded that it is either not at all important or not particularly important to do so. "Our son is the same race as us," wrote one respondent, "so other than different religions, there really wasn't anything to expose him to." "[We] have absolutely nothing to do with her 'birth heritage,'" wrote another. "As she is white, there is little to celebrate in the way of her heritage; she is an American, apple pie and baseball kind of child" (AJIP, 2010–2012).

If we understand Jewishness to be a culture as well as a religion, however, then even domestic, same-race adoptions into Jewish families are transcultural. Some of those adoptees, too, are interested in connecting with their birth heritages, and such families are challenged to support the construction of a blended identity that melds a tiny minority culture with the dominant Christian culture. For example, same-race adoptees, typically from Christian birth families, may gravitate to Christmas trees, Eastern bunnies, or a cross, lacking other obvious symbols. Even if the adoptee identifies with these symbols as part of a generic "American" culture, rather than religiously, they can still be troubling to Jewish adoptive families.

### **NEXT PHASE OF THE RESEARCH: ADOPTEES' CONCEPTION OF THEIR OWN IDENTITIES**

In the survey, we asked Jewish adoptive parents how they thought their children conceived of their own identities. Overall, respondents split evenly between "wholly and exclusively Jewish" (40%) and "Jewish and also culturally/ethnically/racially something else" (41%). Considerable differences emerged, though, between white and nonwhite adoptees, and between domestic and international adoptees. Sixty-eight percent of parents of white adoptees and 53% of parents of domestically adopted children said "wholly and exclusively Jewish," but only 22% of parents of nonwhite adoptees and 30% of parents of internationally adopted children chose that option. (Interestingly, the number who chose "not Jewish at all" was consistently tiny, just 2% of the total irrespective of the type of adoption.) Given the trends toward transracial and transnational adoption, the number of adoptees who conceive of themselves as having non-exclusively Jewish identities has thus increased dramatically in recent decades.

But how do adoptees themselves conceive of their identities? How have they coped with the complex situations they face? To what extent have they attempted



to create “blended” identities that combine Jewishness with another identity related to birth heritage, and to what extent have they kept those identities separate or even rejected one or both of their identities? Have questions of authenticity with regard to Jewish identity served to alienate them from Judaism, Jewishness, and Jewish identity, or do most succeed in finding a comfortable place for themselves within the Jewish community? In an era when more and more individuals and families cross racial, ethnic, and religious lines, it is important for the Jewish community to confront these issues directly. There is much to be learned from Jewish adoptees and their families, but we need to know more. In the next phase of our research, we will continue to probe these complex issues by gathering the voices of young adult adoptees through oral histories and narrative and video testimonies, enabling us to create a much fuller picture of the Jewish adoptive experience and the evolving meaning of Jewish identity in America.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR JEWISH COMMUNAL PROFESSIONALS**

The implicit as well as explicit messages that Jewish communal organizations and the people who work in them transmit about adoption, race, ethnicity, and Jewish identity help shape families’ experiences and, ultimately, individual members’ commitments. Agencies—whether schools, JCC’s, family service associations, campus groups, or others—need to assess the messages they convey from the perspective of adoptees and their families and to create welcoming and safe spaces that deal proactively with the issues, sensitivities, and needs of adoptive families. While adoptive families share the characteristics and milestones of all families, they also have needs and patterns that differ, especially around identity formation. Becoming aware of these needs and patterns is an important step in providing appropriate services and opportunities. How, for example, might congregations and Jewish schools support adoptees’ exploration of their personal and family stories, allowing for all the questions and doubts about being a “real” Jew that might emerge? To what extent do Jewish community centers, camps, youth groups, and other organizations convey the range of Jews’ complexions and backgrounds in their written and visual materials? How might Jewish communities support adoptees’ interest in ways of integrating their Jewish identity with identities derived from their birth heritages? Do programs exist to support adoptive families as they wrestle with issues of identity formation and nurture them when they face the turmoil that sometimes occurs with their children’s developmental journeys? To what extent are agencies trying to learn about how these families see themselves and their own needs and what might be helpful to them at different points in the life cycle? As we learn more in our subsequent research, our understanding of the nuances and complexities of Jewish identity among adoptees and their families will deepen, leading us to more profound questions and potentially helpful insights for those who strive to engage Jews meaningfully in Jewish life.

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