pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

"WOW! You're Jewish?"

Transracial Adoption in the American Jewish Community

by Dr. Jennifer Sartori and Dr. Jayne Guberman

Adoption is, quite literally, changing the face of the American Jewish community. Synagogues, Jewish community centers, Jewish schools, and Jewish camps around the country are home to an increasing number of multiracial families, many of which were formed through transracial and/or transnational adoption. The numbers are striking: among the respondents to our recent survey of American Jewish adoptive parents, approximately 70% of those who adopted over the past decade did so transracially (vs. approximately 40% of American adoptions overall) and 63% adopted transnationally (vs. approximately 15% of American adoptions overall), indicating American Jews' openness to adopting across racial, ethnic, and national boundaries. A variety of aspects of the Jewish cultural and historical experience, however, can make identity – rarely simple for adoptees to begin with – especially complicated for Jewish adoptees of color and their families.

These issues are close to our hearts. We are both Jewish, both adoptive parents, and both research scholars. We formed the Adoption and 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. Despite the increasing prevalence of adoption within the American Jewish community, little research has been done on the real-life experiences of Jewish adoptive families, and few resources exist to help them as they explore and negotiate the relationships between birth and adoptive families and heritages. To that end, we launched the first-ever attempt to gather systematic and detailed information about the experiences of Jewish adoptive families. In the first phase of our research, now complete, we conducted a nationwide survey of American Jewish adoptive parents. We are now beginning the next phase of our research, gathering the voices of young adult adoptees raised in Jewish families by conducting oral history interviews and soliciting personal narratives in written, audio, or video formats.

Any exploration of Jewish adoptive families must begin by acknowledging the complex, multi-faceted nature of Jewish identity. Historically, Jewishness was an all-encompassing way of life, including not only what we think of today as "religion" but also law and culture; until modern times Jews lived as a distinct minority in self-governing communities separate from the rest of society. Today, even Jews who are largely non-religious often consider themselves culturally or ethnically Jewish, and virtually all Jews still conceive of themselves as belonging to "the people of Israel" that goes back to Biblical times. Moreover, Judaism as a religion in contemporary American is highly diverse in belief and practice, ranging from fully traditional Orthodoxy to Reform Judaism which interprets Jewish law and practice in a more liberal fashion. These varying conceptions of Jewish identity all have different impacts on adoptees.

In times past, Jewish identity was both obligatory and hereditary; except in rare cases of conversion, one was Jewish because one's biological mother was. In contrast, in the United States today Jewish identity is largely voluntary, and debates about what makes someone Jewish are highly contentious. Is a child Jewish because of his/her biological mother? Or does Jewishness depend on how one is raised and chooses to practice and identify? The contested boundaries of Jewish identity can have weighty implications for Jewish adoptive families. Some would consider an adopted child Jewish only if he/she has undergone a formal, Orthodox conversion. Others accept a wider range of conversion practices. Still others would consider the child Jewish by virtue of his/her adoptive parents' Jewish identity and his/her upbringing. Decisions about conversion of their children are thus among the first and most powerful "Jewish" decisions adoptive parents must make.

Jewish adoptees of color and their families face an additional challenge: the deep-seated presumption – common to American Jews and non-Jews alike – that all Jews are white, and thus that a person of color is, by definition, not a Jew. Because of this presumption, Jewish adoptees of color too often find the authenticity of their identities questioned even by members of their own communities, with potentially corrosive effects. As a white Jewish adoptive mother of a black son comments, "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." Another adoptive mother writes about her daughter, "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." The "joking" but all-too-common comment, "Funny, you don't look Jewish," can be extremely distressing for an adoptee already painfully aware of his/her lack of biological connection to family and community. Similarly Jewish adoptees of color often find that members of their communities of origin question their identity and belonging, with, for example, many African-Americans also assuming that "If you're Black, you can't be Jewish" (or, conversely, that if you're Black you must be Christian). Although these experiences are certainly common among non-adopted Jews of color as well, they can be particularly problematic for adopted individuals, who, having grown up in largely white contexts, may find them especially shocking and whose parents may be less prepared to help them cope with such experiences.

Despite the fact that "Jews come in all colors" (as the Jewish Multiracial Network rightly proclaims), the vast majority of American Jews do identify as white, posing challenges for transracially adoptive families. First and foremost, like most whites, American Jews are by no means immune to racism. Jews of color (adopted and non-adopted) regularly report experiencing prejudice and discrimination within the Jewish community, such as being mistakenly identified as a custodian at a Jewish event or not being seen as an appropriate romantic partner for someone's child. One adoptive parent reflects upon her disturbing experience at a former congregation, where "some people even said non-white Jews 'diluted' the Jewish population."

Short of such explicit racism, white privilege is also common in the Jewish community, as is "Ashkenazi privilege," the assumption that all American Jews have a shared background in Eastern Europe that obscures and delegitimizes other forms of Jewish culture and experience. The dominant whiteness of the American Jewish community and the attendant white and Ashkenazi privilege can complicate efforts of adoptive families seeking to bring up their children in a racially and culturally diverse environment. As one adoptive parent observes, "I really look at books, etc., to see if they are just displaying white Ashkenazi families. I get ticked off when everything is geared toward this norm." Another parent worries "about spending time with large groups of Jews because too often they are all white and we try to limit our time with large groups of all white folks."

The American Jewish community's status as a tiny minority can further complicate the efforts of adoptive parents interested in bringing elements of their children's birth heritages into their family's lives. With widespread assimilation and intermarriage causing significant anxiety about the next generation's Jewish identity, some adoptive families find themselves pressured, subtly or overtly, to prioritize Jewishness, or to incorporate at most only superficial aspects of an adoptee's birth heritage (Chinese food at a bat mitzvah, for example – as long as it does not include pork). Many families find the communal reaction ambivalent, as this parent describes: "The Jewish community is very supportive, but somewhat from a distance. 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." Parents and children may also struggle to find the time as well as the emotional and financial resources for Hebrew school and, say, Chinese or Korean school. "Institutionally and practically, it is very difficult," reflects one adoptive parent. "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. It has been too expensive to belong to a temple and send my daughter to Sunday school…. I will never be satisfied with the non-solution I have found."

Given the Jewish community's concerns about the continuity of Jewish identity, it is perhaps not surprising that many Jewish adoptive families struggle to achieve a blending or balance of Jewish and birth heritage in their everyday lives. In line with best practices in the adoption world today, many Jewish families who have adopted transracially and/or transnationally are devoting considerable attention to incorporating elements of their children's birth heritages into their family lives. Yet many find themselves – whether consciously or unconsciously – prioritizing one over the other. In our survey, only approximately one quarter of respondents reported behaviors that indicated an equal emphasis on both Jewish identity and birth heritage, with over half emphasizing either one or the other.

All this being said, the Jewish community can also provide a very welcoming and supportive environment for transracial and transcultural adoptees. The Jewish people has always been far more racially and ethnically diverse than Americans (Jewish and non-Jewish) commonly recognize, and this diversity has only increased as growing numbers of individuals of color have joined the Jewish community through conversion and/or intermarriage. As a result, Jewish adoptees of color and their families have the opportunity to explore a wide range of Jewish cultures and communities. Indeed, 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 (a nonprofit decided to Jewish ethnic, cultural, and racial inclusiveness) or by specifically seeking out congregations, schools, camps, and youth groups with a critical mass of non-white members. Especially in larger metropolitan areas, such families have a range of options from which to choose, and most appear to be successful in finding welcoming and supportive communities.

American Jewish adoptive parents also benefit from having at least some experience with blended identity, simply by virtue of being part of a minority culture in the United States; increasing numbers do so as members of interfaith or multiracial families as well. Despite communal concerns about Jewish continuity, then, Jewish adoptive parents may be more aware than other parents of the tremendous richness that comes with having multiple heritages, and this in turn may heighten their sensitivity to their children's desires to explore their birth cultures. As one adoptive mother comments, "The bat mitzvah experience was inspirational and transformative for both of us… We made it somewhat traditional but we celebrated multiculturalism and acknowledged her Spanish roots. She wrote and presented an 18-page paper on the history of Judaism in Central America from the Inquisition to the present. She did a dvar torah [public presentation interpreting a reading from the Torah] on racism….. This ceremony really helped her with her identity formation as a Spanish/El Salvadoran Jew." Another parent reflects on how the adoptive experience changed her own conception of Jewishness: "I am more interested in how multiple identities can enrich Jewish identity (the dragon in the sukkah, red eggs at the Jewish naming ceremony)."

The heterogeneity and fluidity of contemporary American Jewish identity can also create opportunities for Jewish adoptees and their families. Adoptive families have the option of exploring multiple communities and varieties of religious and cultural expression in search of a comfortable, supportive, and inclusive home. Many respondents to our survey reflected on the transformative effect that being an adoptive parent had had on their own Jewish identity. As one parent expressed it, "Becoming an adoptive parent to a JOC [Jew of Color] radically changed my conception of what being Jewish means, in a broader and more inclusive sense. (I'm almost embarrassed at my lack of sensitivity on this subject in my pre-adoptive life.) It has also made Judaism more meaningful to me in an ethical, spiritual, and intellectual sense, rather than as a kitschy, 'ethnic identified' – i.e. it's all about chicken soup and matzoh balls." We know less about the experiences of Jewish adoptees, but those interested in blending their birth and adoptive heritages may well benefit from the adaptability of Jewishness, choosing to identify strongly with certain elements while minimizing the importance of others.

In the next phase of our research, we want to hear directly from young adult adoptees (age 18-36) raised in Jewish families. We have no doubt that the process of listening to adoptees speak about their own experiences will bring to light new perspectives and challenges. If you or someone you know is interested in helping us learn more about the complexities of the Jewish adoptive experience, please contact us at adoptionandjewishidentity@gmail.com.

Dr. Jennifer Sartori and Dr. Jayne Guberman are co-directors of the Adoption and Jewish Identity Project. Sartori is Associate Director of Jewish Studies at Northeastern University, and Guberman is an independent scholar and oral history consultant; both are also adoptive mothers.