

# CROSS-CULTURAL ADOPTION: NEW HORIZONS FOR JEWISH FAMILY SERVICE AGENCIES

<sup>1</sup>GAIL J. LIPSITZ, MAT, <sup>2</sup>LUCY Y. STEINITZ, PH.D.,  
<sup>3</sup>MYRA L. HETTLEMAN, LCSW, and <sup>4</sup>IRENE JORDAN, LCSW  
<sup>1</sup>Community Relations Coordinator, <sup>2</sup>Executive Director, <sup>3</sup>Associate Director, Children's Services, and <sup>4</sup>Coordinator of Adoption Services of Jewish Family Services of Baltimore

*Changing family patterns and increasing problems with infertility are compelling Jewish family service agencies to restructure their adoption services, and specifically, to develop cross-cultural adoption programs. Cross-cultural adoption raises unique issues for Jewish families and their adopted children. Jewish family service agencies can play a pivotal role in helping families struggling with these issues by offering a range of services through the life cycle and by sponsoring adoptive family support groups.*

**T**his article presents the response of Jewish family service agencies to the recent increase in cross-cultural adoptions as seen from the perspective of one agency, Jewish Family Services of Baltimore. Cross-cultural adoption programs under Jewish auspices are needed because of the unique issues faced by Jewish families before and after the adoption placement. This article offers practical guidelines to help families and communal institutions deal with this special way to build a Jewish family.

## THE NATIONAL JEWISH CONTEXT: INFERTILITY AS A MOTIVATION FOR ADOPTION

The evolution of cross-cultural adoption programs in the Jewish community must be seen in the context of changes in the contemporary Jewish family that affect all forms of adoption. Jews are choosing adoption for many reasons. Adoption is an option for the single parent who wishes to have a family. Some Jewish couples also choose adoption for ideological reasons, such as concern about population growth.

Increasingly, however, problems with infertility are motivating Jewish couples toward adoption. In fact, one in five Jewish couples of childbearing age in America struggles with infertility. This figure is somewhat higher than in the general community, as Jews tend to marry and begin childrearing later. Thus, although Jews are adopting for other reasons, infertility is the primary impetus.

Infertility is a heartbreaking situation for any couple. The pain of Jewish couples is intensified by constant reminders of how valued children are in the Jewish tradition, as epitomized by the commandment, "Be fruitful and multiply." Perhaps because infertility goes to the heart of a couple's private relationship, often making them feel isolated from others, the Jewish community is only beginning to be aware of the special issues faced by infertile couples.

## INFERTILITY AND ADOPTION IN JEWISH TRADITION

Both infertility and adoption have a long tradition in Judaism. The first ancestral couples in the Bible—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel—were all initially infertile. (Like Hannah, these women did all eventually conceive.) Exam-

---

Parts of this article were originally printed in "F.A.C.E. Facts," July/August 1989, Baltimore.

ples of adoption appear in biblical and talmudic literature. Abraham adopted his servant Eliezer, Moses grew up as an "adopted son" in the home of Egyptian royalty, and Mordecai adopted his orphaned cousin Hadassah (Esther).

Pointing out that the ancient Jewish sources can shape our attitudes toward adoption, Rabbi Michael Gold (1988) offers two insights that provide a framework for a modern response to infertility. First, Jewish couples need not accept infertility as God's will. Just as our ancestral mothers prayed to God to ask for spiritual intervention and brought their handmaidens to their husbands to ensure themselves a child to raise, Jewish couples today should be encouraged to pursue alternative means of fulfilling their desire to have a family of their own. In addition, Judaism places value on the parent who nurtures and educates a child, regardless of whether that parent gave birth to the child. The Jewish community has traditionally viewed adoption in a very positive light. This attitude is embodied in the modern Hebrew word for adoption, *ametz*, meaning "strengthen," from a reference in Psalm 80 to a stem transplanted and made strong.

#### CROSS-CULTURAL ADOPTION: A RECENT PHENOMENON IN JEWISH FAMILY SERVICE

The term "cross-cultural adoption" is used here to refer to international or intercountry adoption. Although Jewish family service agencies have a long experience with traditional adoptions, they have only recently undertaken cross-cultural adoption programs. In fact, of 27 Jewish family agencies in the United States offering full adoption services (and 10 others with partial adoption services), only 14 offer cross-cultural adoption programs (Posner, 1989). According to the Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies (1988), these agencies participated in 100 international adoptions between August 1, 1987 and July 31, 1988.

Jewish family agencies have developed

these programs in response to the virtual cessation of placement of healthy, domestic-born infants via traditional adoption agencies. Demographic changes—a declining birth rate, later marriages, the postponement of childbearing, smaller families, and a greater acceptance of unmarried mothers choosing to parent their children—have affected Jewish families, creating new needs. In response, Jewish family services have restructured their adoption programs.

Those involved in cross-cultural adoption, however, have few role models or research studies to help shape their experience; hence, the importance of Simon and Altstein's (this issue) investigation of the implications of intercountry adoption for social work practice.

#### UNIQUE JEWISH ISSUES IN CROSS-CULTURAL ADOPTION

Like any family adopting cross-culturally, Jewish families face the challenge of integrating their child's own biological, ethnic, cultural, and religious heritage with the differing heritage of the family. Experts on adoption (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Melina, 1986) agree that a vital building block in the child's sense of identity and self-esteem is an understanding of his or her roots. Furthermore, incorporating elements of their child's birth culture can greatly enrich an adoptive family's daily life.

However, Jewish families who adopt cross-culturally confront certain unique issues that continue through the life cycle. For example, Jewish tradition requires ritual circumcision (*brit*) for a male child. When a healthy child is adopted as a newborn, having a *brit* usually presents no problem. Yet, most cross-cultural adoptions occur when the infant is at least several months old. At what age should the ritual circumcision be done for a baby making a transition from different caretakers and a different country? How can a family avoid disrupting the stability and security they are trying to provide the infant? For children adopted

when they are older, problems of trust, understanding the ritual, and anxiety arise. Families need to reach the best plan for their family by consulting with a rabbi, mohel, pediatrician, and urologist. Counseling by a social worker can give a family needed direction.

In cross-cultural adoption, as in any adoption by a Jewish family, unless the child is born to a mother who is Jewish, Jewish tradition requires that the child be formally converted to Judaism through submersion in a mikvah (ritual bath). However, Reform Judaism does not require ritual submersion, and the other branches of Judaism disagree on such matters as the timing and nature of conversion. It is advisable for Jewish adoptive parents to consult with their rabbis to find the best solution for their family.

The naming ceremony, whether occurring as part of the brit or as a separate occasion, can be a highly significant starting point for a Jewish adoptive family to confront and celebrate the multifaceted identity of their child. Many parents today are writing their own naming ceremonies to integrate elements from each part of the child's heritage and are giving their child three names: an American name, one from the birth country, and a Hebrew name.

The final stage of conversion is Bar or Bat Mitzvah. According to Jewish law, conversion requires the knowing consent of the person undergoing the ceremony. A minor may be converted, but the conversion is not binding until the child actively chooses to accept his or her Jewish status and responsibilities upon reaching maturity. A Jewish adoptive family must face the possibility that their young adolescent may reject the conversion at this point.

Of fundamental importance is the fact that Jewish families who adopt cross-culturally place a double-minority status upon their children. Children born in Korea, India, or Latin America come from a predominant race and majority religion into a new environment in which both their acquired religion and their racial/

national origin place them into distinctly minority categories. These multiple identities will raise issues for the children and their families as the children grow up.

Because of their differing physical appearance, these children will encounter in the dominant white, Christian culture around them reactions ranging from ignorance to curiosity to prejudice. In addition, children adopted cross-culturally and raised as Jews will have to struggle with the question of "Who is a Jew?" well before adolescence as they recognize that most do not have the physical characteristics typically considered Jewish.

Jewish adoptive families can act on their children's behalf by reminding and educating the Jewish community that Judaism is not a race. The Jewish family is an international one, comprised of people characterized by a broad spectrum of ethnic backgrounds and physical appearances (Roseman, 1984). This is readily apparent in Israel where Jews gather from all over the world, but is much less visible in Jewish communities in the United States.

For Jewish adoptive families with a strong religious identity, religion provides an opportunity to give children a sense of rootedness and stability. Such parents may feel quite comfortable teaching their children about their native cultural heritage, but not about their native religion. These families are inclined to emphasize Judaism much more, hoping that it will keep them in the ongoing task of defining who they are. Whatever the parents' religious orientation, sensitivity, honesty, and an openness to the child's own identity struggles are key.

Their Jewish identity can be a source of strength to families who adopt cross-culturally. Phyllis Nissen, co-founder of Stars of David, the national information and support network for Jewish adoptive families, notes that, unlike other families who adopt cross-culturally, Jewish parents may find the task of helping their children deal with their multiple identities somewhat easier because they share with their

children the experience of being a minority (Melina, 1987). And Steven Nickman, author of *The Adoption Experience*, points out that the emphasis on "belonging" in Jewish culture may help adoptees who feel they have lost their biological heritage (Melina, 1987).

Some parents question whether it is best to educate their children in a Jewish day school to solidify their Jewish identity or in a secular school where they will have more contact with children of different racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds and be less conscious of their status as a minority within a minority. Depending on the decision they make, such parents may seek other opportunities to compensate for what is lacking in their child's school environment, whether through the neighborhood, various enrichment activities, or after-school Hebrew school.

Identity issues are intensified during adolescence (Silverstein, 1985; Simon & Altstein, this issue). Adolescents who are adopted need to discover how they are similar to and different from not one but two sets of parents. How much harder is this task when they know little or nothing about their birth parents, but must rely instead on their fantasies. As adolescents adopted cross-culturally begin dating, issues of identity and peer acceptance raised by their complex cultural and religious backgrounds come into sharp focus. How these issues are resolved depends on a multitude of variables. Counseling can be of great benefit at this time. A fundamental question for Jewish adoptive parents during this period is will their adolescents' Jewishness serve as an anchor to help them navigate the storm, or will it be one of the focal points for their feelings of isolation and never quite fitting in?

#### THE ROLE OF JEWISH FAMILY SERVICES

How can Jewish family service agencies help families grapple with the issues of cross-cultural adoption? The experience of

Jewish Family Services of Baltimore is offered here as a resource to other agencies working with these families.

By the early 1980s, traditional adoption placements at JFS had virtually halted because few birth parents were seeking agency services. At the same time, JFS was receiving many requests for adoption. In response the agency sought other ways to help parents build their families through adoption. The adoption program, now called Adoption Alliances, was then expanded to offer identified and international adoptions.

Hundreds of prospective adoptive families have consulted with JFS, many expressing interest in international adoption. Of these, eight families have completed international placements with the help of the agency.

Based on the premise that adoption is a life-long experience, JFS is also available to adoptive families throughout the life cycle. The agency offers counseling for couples dealing with infertility, as well as a Jewish Family Life Workshop, "Preparing for Adoption," which includes information about alternative ways to adopt and referral to other resources in the community providing such education.

Depending on the program, JFS works with married couples (with or without children), single people, and people over age 40. At one time, like many agencies, JFS set an upper age limit of 40 years for prospective adoptive parents; however, this policy was reassessed in light of the agency's growing conviction that such "older parents" can be very effective. (Factors of health are taken into consideration as appropriate.) In addition, as the definition of family has expanded, JFS has come to appreciate the dilemmas and strengths of single parents who wish to adopt.

The specific services provided in its international adoption program include a home study and supportive, referral, and postplacement services to prospective adoptive parents who themselves locate a child overseas, often through the U.S.-based and international resources offered to them by their JFS social worker. As part

of the home study process, prospective parents are also prepared for issues related to raising a child adopted cross-culturally.

Once a family has adopted, JFS offers follow-up support services. In the "Workshop for Parents of Adopted Children," topics of discussion include talking with children about adoption (the never-ending story), helping children with their feelings about being adopted, finding one's place in the Jewish community, and sharing adoption situations all families face. It is significant that most of the participants in these workshops have children of preschool and early elementary school ages. JFS also sponsors an ongoing support group for parents of adolescent and adult adoptees.

#### STARS OF DAVID

In 1988, JFS offered its first "Workshop for Parents Who Have Adopted Cross-Culturally," which afforded Jewish adoptive parents in Baltimore an opportunity to discuss the unique issues of cross-cultural adoption with others in similar circumstances under the guidance of a clinical social worker with expertise in adoption. Participants in this workshop formed the nucleus of a local chapter of the national Stars of David network. JFS accepted the group's invitation for co-sponsorship, thereby giving Stars of David the advantages of access to the agency's staff, professional resources, and secretarial support.

During the 3 years since its inception, the Baltimore Stars of David group has attracted families who have adopted internationally, as well as domestically. Several families have biological children as well. Participants come to Stars of David through word of mouth or referrals by JFS or other adoption resources. Still others respond to publicity in the press or in community newsletters. Stars of David holds family social get-togethers and programs to celebrate Jewish holidays four to five times a year. Some of these meetings are specifically designed to highlight cultural diversity,

such as a hands-on program featuring musical instruments from around the world. In addition, several programs for adults have given parents opportunities to address issues of mutual concern, such as special challenges facing the adoptive family, adoption through the eyes of the adoptee, and evoking family values by creating family stories—a special task for adoptive parents.

The most recent adult program, "Making Difference a Positive Experience for Children," focused on practical suggestions for families who have adopted cross-culturally. The program gave parents a forum to discuss responses in the Jewish community ranging from ignorance to prejudice about cross-cultural adoption and to develop strategies to deal with those responses. Much of the discussion dealt with how adoptive parents can educate their families, communities, and schools to value cultural diversity. Participants shared resources, such as books, music, games, toys, and articles, that they have found effective for teaching the value of diversity.

The experience of the Baltimore chapter of Stars of David bears out the findings of Simon and Altstein who have emphasized the benefits of affiliation with such a support group. (Since Stars of David began in 1985, 800 families have joined the national organization.) Parents are attracted by the opportunity to discuss issues unique to Jewish adoptive families. They want their children to get to know others who are both adopted and Jewish. Many of the parents plan to remain involved in the group for a long time, realizing that they and their children will benefit from the support of other Jewish adoptive families as the children grow. Among the 25 actively involved families in Baltimore, bonds have begun to form among adults and children. A great deal of informal networking occurs between meetings around such issues as circumcision, conversion, questions of identity, and prejudice in school.

Some families are gaining special kinds of support from Stars of David. Couples considering adoption or waiting for children to arrive have found it helpful to see "real" children integrated into their adoptive families and to ask questions of other families who have experienced what still awaits them. Stars of David has helped some intermarried couples, particularly those who have adopted cross-culturally, identify those aspects of Judaism that they wish to nurture in their families and begin to integrate complex strands of ethnic, cultural, and multiple religious heritages. Single adoptive parents, another minority, also find the group offers a welcoming community for them and their children.

It should be noted that the ideas and impetus for the Stars of David programs come from the members of the group, who do the planning and organizing. JFS offers support and consultation, but the life of the group depends mostly on a core of active families. Although members seek the expertise of professionals, such as social workers, psychologists, and rabbis, much is learned from discussion among the participants themselves.

This point is significant because it demonstrates that a Jewish family service agency can sponsor an adoption-related workshop or a local Stars of David chapter in its community even if the agency does not have a formal adoption program. Often, starting a group is a matter of simply connecting adoptive families so that they do not have to depend on chance encounters in the grocery store or at the community swimming pool to find each other. In Stars of David, Jewish family service agencies can find a meaningful way to respond to a unique Jewish communal need.

### CONCLUSION

Jewish family service agencies face the challenge and responsibility of developing services and programs to meet the needs of families who adopt cross-culturally.

Although many agencies may lack comprehensive adoption programs, they can nevertheless help these families in meaningful ways by sponsoring support groups such as Stars of David, and by offering Jewish family life workshops on adoption issues. One advantage agencies have is that adoptive families, having navigated the rough waters of the adoption process, are usually vocal, proactive individuals able to articulate their needs to professionals and eager to work with them. Since cross-cultural adoption is such a new phenomenon in the American Jewish community, social workers must learn from the unique experiences of the families. Ideally, Jewish adoptive families and Jewish family service agencies can work as partners to educate each other, the Jewish community—including other families, rabbis, organizations, and educators—and the community at large about this special way to grow a family tree.

### REFERENCES

- Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies (1988). Service and financial data Memo. Kendall Park, NJ: Author.
- Brodzinsky, David M., & Marshall Schechter (eds.) (1990). *The psychology of adoption*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Diamant, Anita (1988, January). New Jewish faces. *Hadassah Magazine*.
- Gold, Michael (1988). *And Hannah wept: infertility, adoption, and the Jewish couple*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society.
- Melina, Lois R. (1986). *Raising adopted children: A manual for adoptive parents*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Melina, Lois R. (1987, April). *Adopted Child*, 6, (4).
- Posner, Julia L., with Guilianelli, J., contributing editor. (1989). *Guide to adoption agencies: A national directory of adoption agencies and adoption resources*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.
- Roseman, Kenneth, & Leipzig, Arthur. (1984). *All in my Jewish family*. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations.
- Silverstein, Deborah N. (1985, Summer). Identity issues in the Jewish adopted adolescent. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 61, 4.