

In This Issue:

- 1... Debating International and Domestic Adoption
- 7... Who Is A Jew
- 8... Legislative Updates
- 9... Views On Religion - Conversion and Circumcision



**IT'S
MEMBERSHIP
RENEWAL
TIME! PLEASE
CHECK THE
MAILING
LABEL FOR
YOUR
EXPIRATION
DATE!!**

From The Desk Of The Editor



Happy Festival of Lights/Happy 2000!

So much happens in the course of any 12 months, and this year was so anticipated as the new Millennium/New Century approaches (isn't the new Century 1/1/01???).

With each new year, new beginning, we look and reflect, we evaluate, we make determinations what was good, bad, what needs improvement, what is just perfect.

In the past year, we have tried to make this newsletter more topical and informative, to insert more dialogue about issues and concerns. We hope to continue to shape this into a publication that will give you pause, make you think, react, converse, and correspond.

We always welcome your comments and contributions, for without you we are but voices in the wind.

Have a magnificent and safe New Year's celebration and we'll see you in 2000!

International vs. Domestic/ Birthparent availability

[Editor's note: This series of postings from the Internet deal with domestic versus international adoptions and crosses into areas dealing with birthmothers]

- We've been home with our daughter, M., three months. Sometimes I feel very sad that I didn't give birth to her—but a total stranger did. M. is my daughter and I am her mother, but I don't quite know how to handle the pain I feel at the existence of this "other mother" out there, who will have a claim on my daughter's mind and heart even if my daughter can never meet her, as is probably the case since she's from China.

I often hear people talk about how sad they feel for the b-mom, how much they honor her, etc. And we often talk about our children's needs to express their sadness or anger over the loss of their b-parents.

But I haven't heard much talk about our having to share the status of parent with this imaginary figure—the b-mom—in a way that birthparents don't. Does anyone else think about this?

- We adopted internationally because, among other reasons, we did not want to be involved in an open adoption and we wanted more control over the

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is the quintessential nonprofit information/support network for Jewish and interfaith adoptive families. Encompassing all branches of Judaism, STARS OF DAVID is a family support group, not an adoption agency.

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process. As a lawyer I was not worried about the legal issues as I understood that birthparent recalcitrance once the child was relinquished is rare especially where they are adequately counseled, but I also knew it was a real possibility and that others had undergone it here.

This was initially my husband's desire: we have custody of his daughter and, until very recently, she was not a part of the child's life, except very occasionally. My husband did not want another such complicated relationship albeit a different legal one. Down here in Texas the agencies' generally want the more open the better. Further, here the wait for a baby is only about a year but the process, as most of you know, it involves being picked by a birthmother. Call me weak, but after two years of infertility and a year of custody litigation, I wanted more control over my household and family. With international adoption I did still have to get "picked" by an agency and an orphanage, but I knew it would not be an unending wait and I had more control over age, gender and health of the child I felt I could properly parent. My son was adopted at 7 months and is a wonderful, healthy and beautiful (inside and out) kid. I do have identifying information about my son's birth family and he "knows" (3 years old—what does he "know" about these types of things) that he was adopted. He also knows he comes from Russia—just like two of his teachers at the JCC. I don't plan on making anything a prohibited secret.

-- I think that the decision to adopt is deeply personal, and we do it for many different reasons. I planned to adopt domestically, through social services, for a number of reasons. I did some math, and figured out how much money I'd have for my child's education if I took the fees for a private or international adoption and invested them in a college fund. I looked around in the city where I live and realized how many kids were living in foster care, and wanted to do something small about that. I recognized that my choice would quite likely rule out the possibility of open contact with the birth family, and although that has always made me sad, I felt it was worth that loss.

Like most of us, I faced all kinds of challenging questions: why don't you just go get some sperm and do it the "normal" way; wouldn't you feel safer with a private agency adoption where you'd know the prenatal history; how about an open adoption so your child can know their birth family; why not a southeast Asian baby—after all, you used to live there; couldn't you get a Russian baby that would look more like you?

I planned to adopt transracially, maybe because I was seeing so much trauma in the lives of my biracial and African American students. I expected to adopt a toddler, because as a single mom I knew that most social workers would choose couples first for infants. But you never know how the dice will fall. A year ago yesterday I became the mother of a healthy 4-month-old girl whose blue eyes and brown hair match mine more closely than my siblings' do. Go figure.

I have received incredible gifts of support from adoptive families whose children came to them through open adoption, from overseas, via social services, and in private independent agency adoptions. Every one of those families has overcome tremendous obstacles to build the relationships they dreamed of—but the pitfalls and benefits of each adoption story are unique, depending on the choices the parents made about adoption.

The thread that stands out for me, what seems to link every adoptive family, is that we somehow, unconsciously, knew where our children would be waiting for us. There is no simple explanation for how the universe can be so carefully arranged that our children are waiting for us right there, where we decided to look for them. I'm just tremendously grateful that S. managed to find me.

-- I'm the adoptive mom of an almost 6 year-old little girl from China whom we adopted when she was 8 mos. old. We were not so much concerned about a birth parent's wanting some contact with our child, but were very concerned about a b-mom deciding, after the baby had been placed with us, that she wanted the baby back. Having been through so much pain and loss while going through the infertility business, we really didn't want to open ourselves up to that kind of a loss — it felt like it would be unbearable.

Another concern that I had is that it is estimated that quite a large number of infants available for adoption domestically have had drug and/or alcohol prenatally. While fetal alcohol syndrome can be identified, fetal alcohol effect often cannot. The same is true of most drug involvement — if the b-mom was using shortly before the delivery, this may be detectable, but if the use was more remote (like during the first trimester, when the effect can be severe) it is likely to be impossible to

determine. Certainly there is much that we cannot control even about the health of bio-children, but we were quite certain that had we been able to conceive, the child would have developed in a drug-free, alcohol-free environment. While I realize that not all infants so exposed do develop problems, the incidence of serious behavior and learning problems in this population is definitely elevated. We wanted to maximize the likelihood of having a healthy child. Thus we chose China, which has some of the healthiest babies available for adoption — and very low rates of alcohol and drug involvement. We also liked the forthright and well-established process involved.

Back to the b-mom issue. We do deal with it all the time. When my daughter is angry with me she will sometimes say, "I want to go live with my birth mother in China." The fact that we know so little about the b-mom makes it even easier for her to become romanticized. I usually make a judgement call at times like this. If it seems to me that S. is really wanting to talk about adoption issues I'll respond with something like, "You really wish you could know her. Me too. I wonder what she is like." On the other hand, often when S. says this she is simply expressing her frustration with me and I'll respond with something like, "Right now you're angry with me and you think that your birth mother probably would let you stay up later (or whatever the particular issue is). It's okay to be angry, but you still do need to go to bed now." Not easy, but this is the best I've been able to come up with.

-- While it is rare that a birthmother wants the child back after the adoptive family has the child a while, it is quite common for her to change her mind about the adoption either just before or just after the birth. While this is less heartbreaking than having the child come home with you and then having to give her/him up, it is still very hard both in terms of the fact that you allowed yourself to believe you would be a parent,



and then suddenly it is not to be. This is harmful to the adoptive parents because they need that anticipatory bonding in order to prepare themselves for parenthood and often, if they do finally adopt after going through a failed adoption, it makes them less able to feel that they can fully bond with the baby, for fear that the child will not be allowed to remain with them. I read a study saying that this could effect mother child bonding, because of both lack of emotional preparation on the part of the parents to parent, and the fear of fully bonding with the baby until the adoption is final. Add to this fact that many domestic adoptions can take many months, even a year or more to finalize and you can see how trying this situation can be.

I am not saying that birth parents should not have the right to change their mind. Of course they should. I just know that I, for one, could not have handled it emotionally if we had met a birthmother, gone through the pregnancy, done all the things expectant parents do (thinking of names, telling friends, etc.) and then find that in the end, we did not have a baby. This would be very much like a miscarriage to me.

Also, I didn't like the idea of waiting for a birthmother to choose me. It reminded me of being chosen in gym class to be on a team. As you might imagine, I was always picked last, and I see no reason to put myself in that position again. But seriously, I liked the idea of my child already being out in this world and needing someone, and then that we would be just matched up. I know that many people believe that there is divine intervention in such match ups. But I have always felt that it is the miracle of adoption that my daughter and my husband and I, though completely unrelated before the adoption and having no connection before hand, could come together and be a family. Not a miracle created by G-d, but a miracle

created by human beings. I think that's a much more powerful idea to me.

-- Not a day goes by without my thinking about the fact that we adopted the children and that they born to other people. Yes, the knowledge of a birthmother existing, no matter where, is something that all adoptive parents have to deal with — whether by denial, by totally open adoption when possible, by how they discuss it with the children and every possible scenario.

I think there are two parts to the “I did not give birth to this child”. One is a regret at having missed out on the almost universal female experience of pregnancy and childbirth. The other is “how does the fact that I did not give birth to this child influence our relationship”. Do we feel less like “real” mothers because there is a birthmother in the shadows? Will our children love us less? I think almost all adoptive parents think about these questions.

-- I am an adoptee and I can tell you that no matter what adoption is (it is) different then giving birth, not in a good or bad way, just different, and our b-moms are far from imaginary figures, they are very real. Had it not been for them then we would be here. They are part of us as our adoptive moms are as well. No one can take the place of either, they are just different. Never in my mind has there ever been a feeling of wanting one or the other, it was always both that I wanted.

Don't let your child ever sense that the subject of his/her b-mom is taboo. That will lead to feelings of not belonging and make him/her less willing to talk.

Nothing about his/her b-mom is imaginary. To say this would in essence be saying that your child is therefore a figment of someone's imagination. And your child is as real as his origins are. Join hands with your child and explore the land of his family. Cry with him



about his lack of knowledge. Guide him as to how to learn all he can. Don't worry that it will hurt him to never know. It would hurt him more to think he shouldn't ask.

- I think that the more you know about and learn about your child's origins, the more comfortable you will become with them. The unknown is unknown, and therefore it can be scary. But when we stop making it unknown, and open ourselves up to making it "known," that it ceases to be so threatening. Give yourself time to get used to your new child. Make contact with other families in your area who also have children from your child's country. Participate in activities with them; share stories about your adoption process, your travel, your kids, and what you learned about the country. All this will help you feel less alone, and feel more a part of your child, your child's culture and the whole adoption community (which can be a wonderful sense of support in the years to come).
- I feared domestic adoption because in most states, the birth families have a long legal claim on children. I don't fear my child having a relationship with her birth parents, but I do fear them completely taking her away. This is what pushed me toward international adoption. As I wait for my daughter I am trying to think of every thing possible I can do to provide her with information about her background. I will pry as much information out of the orphanage workers as possible, and try to get pictures and mementos from the orphanage (many people ask the orphanage workers to write a message in a book for the baby). But ultimately I think it will be very hard on the baby not to know anything.
- I think about the birth mother all the time. Right now she's walking around China very pregnant, knowing that she can't keep the child. I can't even imagine her suffering, but I certainly feel some of it, and cry with her often. I also dream about her almost every night. In my dreams my own mother often stands in for the birth mother (I know, tell it to my shrink...), but I know it's the birth mother

because I try to reassure her that the baby will have a good life. Very sad business.

- Many people have told me that they chose to adopt internationally mainly because of fear of b-parent issues that sometimes come to light with domestic adoptions. By going internationally, they feel they won't have to deal with the "sharing" factor later on, or someone knocking on their door later on. These are not my words, but theirs. So I find it particularly interesting that so many who have adopted internationally, do in fact feel a loss for the b-parents both to yourselves and your children.

Our reason for int'l adoption was not at all fear of b-mom. In fact the one disadvantage I feel with international adoption is that there is no information on birth parents for my child. I hope that because she's from a small orphanage that someday in the future we may be able to find her b-parents, if the policy changes in China, by matching where and when she was found. The reasons we chose international adoption are these:

- the waiting time on average is 6 to 8 years in Canada. It can happen earlier with luck, being in the right place at the right time—but that's the average.
- there are ten perfectly good families for every available infant. I didn't want to compete with the other 9. They will all, I'm sure, be good parents.
- we considered adopting an older child domestically. But older children available have been put back into abusive and neglectful situations so often that they really need a certain kind of adoptive parent which we didn't feel we were.



Campaign Speech

By Melissa Greene

My 11-year-old son, Lee, who accompanied my husband and me, and our seven-year-old daughter to Bulgaria two weeks ago to adopt a four-year old, ran for president of Fernbank Elementary School in Atlanta immediately upon his return, gave a rhyming campaign speech, and was resoundingly elected. The speech was about the adoption, so I'm posting it here.

My last name is Samuel; my first name is Lee,
Thanks for taking a minute to listen to me.
I'm sorry that you haven't heard of me yet—
While the others campaigned, I flew on a jet.
I've just gotten back from the land of Bulgaria—
I'm happy to report I did not catch malaria.

We went to a small village, full of chickens and mules
And one small orphanage instead of a school.

We adopted a four-year-old to be my new brother,
He was alone in the world, without father or mother.

In the hotel room in Sofia, he was the happiest yet.
Did he wash Mom's camera in the toilet? with shampoo?
you bet!

For a small Gypsy boy from the poorest small town,
The moving sidewalks of Hartsfield did make him fall down.

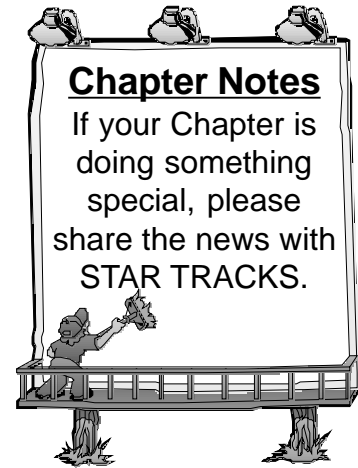
When he first saw my puppy, he wished for a knife.
Now he hurls food at her, and then runs for his life.

Our house is full of amazing splendors:
"Wait, Jesse, don't put your hand in that blender!"

What does this have to do with my campaign? you ask.
Well, raising this young boy will be quite a task.

I want Fernbank to be great for him, and for all of the
others,
In the grand scheme of things, we're all sisters and
brothers.

We have kids here from Guatemala, Mozambique, and
Nepal
I want Fernbank to always be open to all.



Chaverim (South New Jersey/ Philadelphia)

Friday, November 5, over 25 families attended the 1st National Adoption Month Shabbat at Temple Emanuel in Cherry Hill, NJ. We were told that this is the first time any one can remember an event such as this was held. Numerous adoption related readings were read by Stars of David members. Debra Berger told the congregation about Stars of David and National Adoption Month. Shelley Kapnek Rosenberg, author of Adoption and the Jewish Family, A Contemporary Perspective was the guest speaker. She was very well received. After services we met at the *Oneg* and planned to do this again next year.

We are changing our e-mail address from SNJSTARS@aol.com to StarsChvrn@aol.com. We will keep both names until this issue of STAR TRACKS.

Chicago

The Chicago Chapter received a \$25,000 grant, so we are using the money to pay a "consultant" to go after additional grants for the national organization and to update our website. The members of the Chicago

Chapter also helped pass HB631, which is certainly newsworthy.

Rhode Island

Last fall the Rhode Island chapter went to a local apple orchard for a hayride and apple picking. Their annual Hanukkah Party was very successful with a kosher dinner and a magician for the children. One of their adult programs was "The Portrayal of Adoption in the Media." A local rabbi showed sample videos. Parents were advised to preview films with adoption themes before taking their children to see them. Another program was "Advice from Parents of Older Adoptees." Chapter members with older children presented important issues to consider. The parents of younger children found this program to be extremely helpful. The chapter is currently planning family and adult programs for the upcoming year.



Who is A Jew?

[Editor's Note: An interesting Internet posting about an issue familiar to those of us adopting children.]

Normally when a group of people organize themselves in some way and set up a set of rules for membership in their group, the rest of us respect their rules.

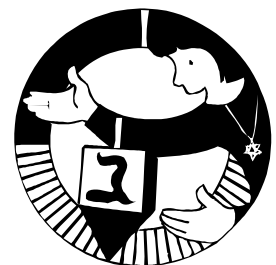
For example, every country has a set of laws for how one can become a citizen. In the case of the US, one can be born in US territory or one can be the child of a US citizen or one can choose to go through a legal naturalization process. Most other countries do not let anyone be a citizen just because they were born there, so the US is unusual in that respect. If I had been born in Switzerland to American parents even if I lived there all my life, I still couldn't just announce to the Swiss authorities that I must be a Swiss citizen because that seemed logical or fair to me. I would still have to apply for legal

naturalization and might not be granted Swiss citizenship.

Similarly, most organized religions have formal rules for how one becomes a member. Most require a formal conversion including a specific act such as baptism. Again, I couldn't just announce that I was a Catholic because I found the religion appealing or thought I shared their beliefs. I would have to go through a formal conversion process to be accepted as a member of the Catholic Church.

Jews, who are one of the oldest groups of people still on this planet also have one of the oldest and most developed legal systems. Not surprisingly, that legal system has a body of law specifically about what is required to be a member. Even though there are differences in practice and interpretation within the major branches of Judaism, there still is common agreement that one has to have a Jewish birth mother or go through a formal conversion, although Reform accepts a variation if the father is Jewish and the child is raised as a Jew.

Since there is no copyright or patent or trademark on the terms Jew and Judaism, anyone can claim to be a Jew or claim that the religion they practice is Judaism, but it is a little *chutzpadik* for them to demand that the rest of the world, particularly the rest of the Jewish world, has to accept their self definition as Jews. For those of us who want to make sure that our children are fully accepted as members of our Jewish communities, we will arrange appropriate conversions for our children in addition to teaching them our religious beliefs and values just as we will arrange for them to become citizens (if foreign born) by going through the appropriate bureaucratic processes on their behalf as well.



Legislative Updates From RESOLVE

RESOLVE Works in NY

The following is an update from RESOLVE of New York City about the effort to pass a state mandate in New York.

UPDATE - SENATE 3131

The Senate has been returning periodically to take care of budget extensions and other fiscal issues. So far a bill requiring infertility coverage by insurance carriers has not been heard.

Never the less, RESOLVE NYC has been hard at work.

On June 29, a letter was faxed to all New York State Senators countering the New York State Catholic Conference opposition to our bill. Amongst the many issues covered by this letter was the fact that "Adoption, though a happy resolution for many couples, can be costly and has inherent risks such as the potential for adopted children to be taken back by their biological parents. Though 50,000 babies and children are placed for adoption each year, 6.1 million Americans experience infertility."

On July 1, RESOLVE NYC faxed a letter to all New York Senators countering the opposition from the Business Council of New York State, Inc. In the letter we stated that The New York State Task Force on Life and the Law found:

"For individuals who are infertile, the financial barriers to assisted reproduction can be devastating. Without insurance coverage for assisted reproduction, many infertile individuals are effectively denied access to these technologies. Some may resort to riskier, less effective (and more expensive) medical interventions, such as tubal surgery, for which insurance companies are more likely to provide reimbursement." p. 441

"We do not agree with those commentators who take the position that insurance coverage for

assisted reproduction would be inconsistent with...interest in promoting adoption. That argument would have greater force if all infertile couples seeking infants for adoption could be matched with babies, but the fact is that many individuals who want to adopt infants cannot, at least without leaving the country. In addition, many individuals have a strong desire for biologically related children, a desire that is worthy of societal respect." p. 442

RESOLVE also hand delivered a new letter to all Senators, countering the claims by the insurance industry that adding infertility coverage will cost insurance companies \$8,000, \$10,000 or even \$800,000 per treatment. Included with this letter are actual statements by insurance carriers that indicate that reasonable and customary" costs are substantially below those being used by industry lobbyists.

The letter further reiterates the actual finding of medical plans in Massachusetts and Illinois that show policy cost increases between \$1.20 and \$1.71 per policyholder per month (\$14.40 to \$20.52 per year) NOT the \$179 per year which the insurance lobbyists are using.

Letter To The Listserv

Assembly bill #5310 passed both houses of the legislature and was sent to the Governor for his signature last week. The bill would allow biological siblings of adoptees to register with the NYS Department of Health's Adoption Information Registry. So far, only adult adoptees and biological parents can register. A.5310 would extend that right to adult biological siblings. (For more information on the bill and the full text, go to [http://assembly.state.ny.us/cgi-bin/showbill?billnum=A05310.](http://assembly.state.ny.us/cgi-bin/showbill?billnum=A05310))

Hope for Children Act

The Hope for Children Act would increase the amount of adoption expenses that can be claimed for a tax credit, would make the adoption tax credit permanent (the current credit will end in 2002), and increases the maximum income level

at which adoptive parents can still receive a tax credit. RESOLVE has been advocating for this important legislation. There are currently 163 cosponsors of H.R. 531, which was introduced by Rep. Bliley (R-VA), and there are 8 cosponsors of S. 341, which was introduced by Senator Craig (R-ID). Both bills are still in the committees to which they were originally sent. Write to the House Ways and Means Committee and ask that H.R. 531 be given a hearing and voted on, and write to the Senate Finance Committee and ask for a hearing and vote on S. 341. Addresses are: House Ways and Means Committee, 1102 LHOB, Washington, DC 20515; Senate Finance Committee, SD-219, Washington, DC 20510.

current safeguards are retained, as defined by the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). The child would have to qualify for citizenship under all conditions established by Congress.

“Once those conditions are fulfilled, US citizenship would be conferred. Proof of compliance would be the issuance of a US passport or other citizenship document.”



MARYLAND ADOPTION REVOCATION PERIOD MAY BE REDUCED

Traci Radice, of RESOLVE of Maryland, is working with state legislators to reduce the period in which birth parents can revoke their adoption consent. Currently, Family Law Article, Section 5-311, allows a birth parent thirty (30) days to revoke his/her consent. We are attempting to change this law to ten (10) days, but we need your assistance. The Bill is being introduced by the House in January and the hearing should be held on or about January 12, 2000.



Views On Religion - Conversion/ Circumcision

[Editor's Note: The following Internet discussion centered on the mechanisms for converting an adopted child to Judaism]

-- A visitor in our home recently asked rhetorically, Why did G-d tell Avraham that the Jews would spend 400 years in captivity? Why was slavery a planned part of the picture? Because a people that has been through the slavery experience understands that the world is not in their control, understands that their welfare, their deliverance, depends upon a higher power. And so there must be unquestioning obedience to the laws of the Torah, upon



From the Sept/Oct issue of Adoptive Families of America:

“Important pending legislation that would confer US citizenship automatically and retroactively to birth upon foreign-born children adopted abroad or adopted in the United States was introduced in the Senate on August 4th, 1999, by Sen. Don Nickles. This bill, introduced in the Senate as S. 1485 will soon be introduced in the house by Rep. Lamar Smith.

“This bill, if enacted, would simplify the current process by which the adopted children of US citizens acquire citizenship. While expeditious citizenship for the adopted children of US citizens is ostensibly a priority of the INS, adoptive families currently have to wait 12 months or longer. It is a duplicative process, with parents having to produce the same documents that have already been shown in the course of the adoption.

“In this legislation, the requirements that adoptive parents must satisfy in order to pass on US citizenship to their foreign-born children are equivalent to those applicable to a US citizen whose biological child was born overseas. All

which that deliverance depends. Much of it does not make sense: *kashrut*, the laws of *Shabbos*, the laws of the *mikveh*. To have this connection to the Master of the Universe means to bind yourself to the Torah's commandments. Many of the laws are delightful to obey; some can be made more delightful (like the celebration that goes with the *bris*), and some are just plain hard. They all carry the same obligation.

I have come to feel that the Torah is not mine to pick and choose among. The commandments are not customs to be adapted to the individual's situation, but are commandments.

For orthodox Jews, circumcision is *halacha*, part of all of the God-given law.

But liberal Jews pick & choose. Why circumcision, defended with great vehemence, when no other *mitzvot* are followed or worried about or defended? There are other *mitzvot* which the Torah says a Jew will be cut off if not followed, e.g. observing *Shabbat*. Yet the same Jews that get very upset about the issue of circumcision happily work & shop on *Shabbat*.

I have to say that circumcision makes me very uneasy. Most of the women I know of my generation feel very uncomfortable about it. Those who've had baby boys have reluctantly had them circumcised. At every *bris* I've attended, there is a huddle of mothers and children at the back, feeling upset about it

The early reform movement didn't practice circumcision. Yes—I know that there are many who'd have lots to say about that. However, please keep in mind that the issue of circumcision is being discussed in the context of Jews who do not believe that God commanded the *mitzvot* as understood by the Orthodox community. These are Jews who pick and choose. Who may go to services on the High Holy Days, but are not *shomer shabbas*.

-- I am glad to see this topic come up as it has been the source of major discussion in our household as we gear up for our second adoption. (Our first is a girl so we were spared this angst.) We are Reconstructionist-leaning Jews with beliefs similar to what other have put forth and we are really agonizing over what to do. I am quite clear that if we were not Jewish, I would not even consider circumcision, in fact, I wouldn't consider doing it if I felt confident that our child would be completely embraced by the Jewish community simply because we, his parents, are Jewish and raising him in a Jewish home as a Jew - whether he is circumcised or not. In fact, if we had a biological child, I would be more likely to NOT circumcise as a birthchild would likely have less issues about his Jewish identity than an adoptee.

-- My fears for a son who is adopted (and probably a child of color) are that 1.) many members of the Jewish community will not accept him fully and 2.) he will already have issues around "belonging." Will being uncircumcised increase any feelings of not being "really" Jewish? I want so much to do what is best for the child's well being but can't get comfortable with either alternative.

-- I guess we were lucky in that our adopted son was only 3½ weeks old when we were able to have his *bris*. Still, the *mohel*, a man with at least 35 years experience, used a little topical anesthetic. One anti-circ person I later had occasion to correspond with seemed convinced that babies go into a "coma-like state" after a circumcision, because there is such trauma. Frankly, I saw no evidence of trauma of any kind, and certainly there was nothing that could have, by any stretch of the imagination, been called a coma-like state. My son was happily taking a bottle a few minutes later. If a child screams for an hour after his *bris*, than either something else is wrong, or the *mohel* did a lousy job.

-- Having come from an observant background, and still being pretty observant now, it never occurred to me for a moment not to have this

done. To me, it is just something that Jews DO. It is a large part of our Jewish identity. Sure, I don't observe all 613 *mitzvot*; everyone picks and chooses to some extent, (even among the Orthodox there are differences of opinion,) but a *bris* - well, as far as I'm concerned, that's really one of the important ones.

I know that for children adopted when they are no longer newborns it's a bit more difficult, but it's still very doable, and probably, if approached in the right way, not at all traumatic.

To me it makes no sense at all to wait until a child is old enough to understand things well enough to make the decision about whether or not to be circumcised, if for no other reason than the older the child, the harder it will be on him, and the longer the recovery time might be. At that point, should the child decide to go ahead with the procedure, it may very well actually BE quite painful and traumatic.

- Parents are often called upon to make decisions for their children. We can't always wait for them to acquire the knowledge necessary to make informed decisions about things. I think this is a case where the parents should (and are fully entitled to) make on behalf of their sons, both biological and adopted. I'm not saying that an adopted son must have his *bris* the minute he gets home - a few months more or less won't make that much of an impact - but why not have it done when the child is as young as possible?

My take on this question is that your biological child may not require conversion, but does require "adoption" into the Covenant via naming or circumcision.

- I agree that Judaism is not a race. However, while it is a religion, it's also something more than that or at least somewhat different from certain other religions.

The important thing here is that Judaism has

a legal system (*halacha*) which regulates many aspects of life - personal, civil, criminal, agricultural. Some of the legal system is applicable only in certain places (Israel) or certain times (when the Holy Temple existed). Like any legal systems, it has loopholes here and there.

When you ask why your legal adoption does not confer Jewishness upon your daughter, you are trying to transfer the result of one legal system (American) into another (Jewish). That's not how it works. To take another example, civil marriages and divorces are also not recognized by Jewish law. Judaism requires its own rituals for these ceremonies. In addition, it also requires adherence to the regulations of the specific civil authority involved.

Now the problem here is that there is no actual legal concept of adoption in Jewish law, as there is in American law. There are many stories in Jewish history of people adopting, i.e. taking another person's bio child and raising it as one's own. This is generally considered to be a meritorious act. However, there is no mechanism for transforming the adopted person's status to the equivalent of a biological child.

People become Jewish according to *halacha* in one of two ways - by being born to a Jewish mother or by converting. There are discussion in the Talmud regarding the permissibility of people converting a minor child - because we are requiring him/her to take on the obligations of Judaism without them having a say. It was decided that we may do so because it's considered to be an advantage for the child to be Jewish and we may act to somebody's advantage in certain matters without their consent.

- I've heard others discuss the conversion topic with the feeling that it is unfair that our children are treated "differently" than they would if they were our birthchildren. I've thought a lot about this, and here's where my thinking has gone on this:

I view conversion to be an official ceremony celebrating and *confirming* the adoption of my daughter, from a Jewish perspective. Many, many people have talked about the need for ceremony in which adoption is made "official" by the religious community. In America today, many religions are creating their own adoption rituals to help give religious sanctification of adoption. I feel that the conversion ceremony did that for me.

I also feel that this ceremony is needed for our benefit and hers in terms of where she fits in in this world. You wouldn't consider yourself really your child's parent if you took her in to live with you without benefit of a formal adoption, even if you took wonderful care of her and loved her with all of your heart. She still wouldn't be your daughter. What changes that? An official ceremony, the official adoption. It is different in all cases, sometimes it's just signing paperwork, sometimes it's appearing in court. In our case, we held up our hands and promised never to abandon her and to always treat her as our daughter in a conference room in a hotel in China. Before that, she wasn't our daughter, after that, she was. It was official. Then later, she wasn't an American citizen till we stood up and took an oath for her and signed a document. (Okay, maybe the oath wasn't strictly speaking required in her case, since she was 20 months old at the time, but it was nice anyway, gave it a feeling of really happening.) Before she wasn't a citizen and afterward, she was. It was official. Same thing with the *mikvah*. We took her to the *mikvah* and dunked her and said a few prayers (maybe the prayers came first? I don't remember.) And then she was Jewish. Before she wasn't, afterwards she was. It was official.

-- I consider myself to also be a liberal Jew. But I have great faith in ceremony. It is helpful for people to look at ceremony in helping them cope with changes in their lives. Why else do we have marriages or funerals. Funerals don't help the dead; they help the living understand how life has now changed. I wonder if this point of view helps you in

looking at conversion? If not, oh well, you don't have to agree with me after all, I'm just expressing one way of looking at it. Don't let disagreement with others opinions chase you off the list. We can all disagree. (Being Jewish, we're all sure to!)

(The following posting is by Rabbi Michael Gold)

-- I read the postings, but tend to stay in the background unless particular issues of Jewish law come up. However, it is difficult for me to be silent on the issue of circumcision. We are not talking about some area of Jewish observance like not eating certain foods or not mixing wool and linen. Circumcision is something fundamental to the Jewish self-definition. It is the symbol of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. That is something that Jews of all the major movements - Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform agree. As a rabbi, I will not convert a baby without a proper *bris*, nor will I name a baby boy if the parents do not have him circumcised.

We can certainly disagree on what is the reason for the long historical survival of the Jewish people. But circumcising our boys has always been fundamental to that survival. I hope those who read this will think twice, and arrange a proper *bris* for their sons, as I did for both of mine.

-- Pursuant to the ongoing debate about *brit milah*, Prof. Jacob Neusner had a very interesting article in the Fall 1999 edition of Jewish Spectator. In an article entitled "Since I'm Jewish, This Must be Judaism," Prof. Neusner writes:

"When religion becomes a matter of personal opinion, then morality gives way to impulse and whim, and sentimentality rules. Private religion appeals to the feeling of the moment and, under such conditions, learning and tradition no longer govern. What is gained by the relevance of the moment is vastly outweighed by what is lost."

Prof. Neusner draws attention to, "...the

theory that Judaism is pretty much an ethnic culture, with some God-talk tacked on for the fastidious. It is not a matter of Divine imperatives, whether about discipline in food or about discipline in sex. It is about customs and ceremonies, not kosher by the law of the Torah but kosher-style pickles and kosher-style hot dogs — not Judaic, but Jewish-style.”

“In the United States, with its stereotypical bias against history and tradition and social authority in favor of individual autonomy, there’s an acute elevation of the individual. The practice of Judaism in America has shown the grotesque possibilities of the privatization of religion. Apparently everything begins with me, personally, this morning, here and now. It is the unique amalgam of the religious and the ethnic in the corporate life of Jewish Americans, who are Jewish and therefore regard themselves as primary data for the definition of Judaism that embodies these possibilities. If “Judaism” is “the religion of the Jewish people,” then whatever religion the Jewish people practice is “Judaism.” And then — get out of the way, because here comes do-it-yourself-Judaism that acknowledges no authority, tradition or communal structure.”

“If religion is how I feel this morning, then no tradition stands in judgement of what I do, no commandments guide my life, God is not invited to do more than pass an opinion, if that much. The religious community, the culture shaped by centuries of encounter with revelation, the social order of universally accepted morality — these weigh in the balance against that radically isolated individual whose conscience outweighs all else.”



Issues of Citizenship

[Editor’s Note: The following Internet posting deals with a man’s problems gaining citizenship for his adopted child.]

Here is the text of the letter that I sent to Pennsylvania’s US Senators (Specter and Santorum) and Rep. William Coyne from Pa.’s 14th District.

Dear Sir,

My name is A.H.L. I was born and raised in Pittsburgh. I graduated from T. High School in 1981. I moved to Israel 13 years ago, in November 1986. However, I am still a US citizen and hold a valid US passport. I maintain a legal address at my parents’ home (my old house; where I am registered to vote), hold a valid Pennsylvania driver’s license, and file a 1040 form every year.

My wife (who is not a US citizen) and I adopted a baby boy, here in Israel, in May 1997, under the auspices of the Labor and Social Welfare Ministry’s Child Welfare Service. Y. has been residing solely and exclusively with us since then. We received a formal adoption order for our son from the Jerusalem District Family Court - thus awarding us full legal custody of him - in January of this year. He was born in Israel and holds Israeli citizenship.

Last week, I went to the US Consulate General at 23 Nablus Road here in Jerusalem to apply for US citizenship, a US passport, and a Social Security Number for him. I brought with me all the necessary documents. However, I was informed by a consular official that since Y. was adopted the process, which otherwise would have been routine and straightforward, will necessarily be long and drawn-out. (I was informed that I must contact the Chief of Naturalization Branch at INS Headquarters in Washington and inquire about Section 322 INA of the 1994 Immigration and Nationality Technical Corrections Act. I have since sent a registered letter asking for details.)

Sen. Specter, I must protest this gross and blatant discrimination against my son merely because he is adopted. If he were my biological son, the process would have been - as I mentioned above - relatively routine and straightforward. Since he is not my biological

son, and solely for this reason, the process is anything but routine and straightforward.

Isn't this a throwback to, or some vestigial remnant of, the days when adoption was something that was not discussed in public and adoptees were stigmatized for being who they were? Why is this legal disability being heaped on my son merely because I am not one of the co-authors of his DNA sequences?

I know that Article I, Section VIII, Clause 4, of the Constitution of the United States empowers the Congress to, "Establish a uniform rule of naturalization...". But I would like to know why the Congress has seen fit to enshrine - in the relevant legislation - this discrimination against adoptees such as my son?

I am known that, among its many concerns, the INS must (justifiably) guard against fictitious foreign adoptions being used to illegally obtain US citizenship. But surely there must be other ways in which the INS could guard against attempts to illicitly obtain US citizenship under false pretenses, etc. without discriminating against legitimate adoptions and legitimate adoptees?

Thank you.

Sincerely,
A.H.L.

Website For Multiracial Information

People seeking additional information about multiracial Judaism, can check in at the following website:
www.jewishdiversity.com

Stars of David Chapters & Agency Members

To assist your communication with STARS OF DAVID, we are running this list of available e-mail addresses for various chapters and agencies and officers.



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STARS OF DAVID CHAPTERS AND CONTACTS - The following is a listing of current STARS OF DAVID chapters and contacts as of 9/99. Should you wish to start a chapter or be an area contact, please call National Chapter Coordinator Sue Katz at 1-800-STAR-349. Should you wish to contact someone locally, please call the closest chapter or contact listed.

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- CA ORANGE COUNTY CHAPTER, Marcia Marsinko, JFS, Orange, (714) 445-4950
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