

From the Editor's Desk



History.

A week before I wrote this column, Vice President Al Gore selected Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman to be his running mate in November. This marks the first time a Jew has been at the head of a national ticket. The jokes have started (Air Force One will now be called EL AL Gore).

A day or two ago, the Reform Party selected a black woman to be its Vice Presidential candidate.

History.

Whether or not Governor Bush, Vice President Gore, Mr. Buchanan or anyone else finishes on top in November 2000, we see history here at the new millennium.

We know America is the melting pot, a land of many different cultures, colors and ideologies. As adoptive parents we probably know that better than anyone.

Our families represent the rich mosaic of the land and this issue celebrates that mosaic with contributions on multicultural homes, gay and lesbian adoption, and Jews of color.

Please be certain to be a voice heard and register to vote for the candidate(s) of your choice in November.

With the High Holidays upon us, on behalf of the Officers, Directors and Trustees of STARS OF DAVID INTERNATIONAL, may you have a happy, healthy, peaceful and prosperous year full of *naches*.

B'Shalom



Oregon

In a press release dated May 30, 2000, "Bastard Nation and adoptee rights supporters across the country are cheering today as Oregon's Measure 58 finally goes into effect, well over a year after it was passed by a majority vote of Oregon's citizens in November, 1998.

Measure 58 restores adult adoptees' access to their original birth certificates, a right abrogated by the state of Oregon in 1957. The measure was upheld at every step in a series of court challenges brought by an adoption attorney on behalf of six anonymous birthmothers who claimed they had been promised permanent anonymity under Oregon's sealed records law. Advocates for the preservation of secrecy in adoption affiliated with longtime open records foes, the National Council for Adoption, petitioned the United States Supreme Court to hear the case. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor refused today to issue another stay, effectively handing victory to adopted citizens born in the state of Oregon.

Bastard Nation, which has been involved in the fight for Measure 58 ever since it was proposed at the group's first conference in July of 1997, congratulates and expresses profound thanks first and foremost to Chief Petitioner Helen Hill for her dedication and generosity in getting Measure 58 onto the ballot and seeing it to victory. We also acknowledge the efforts



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STARS OF DAVID INTERNATIONAL, INC. 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. For more information/membership contact: Debra Berger, P.O. Box 573, Woodbury, NJ 08096-0573, (856) 384-2764, or StarsChvrn@aol.com

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and support of others in the adoption reform community, notably the Oregon Adoption Rights Association. There would have been no victory in the courts without the diligence of attorneys Thomas McDermott, an adoptive father, and Roy Pulvers. Thanks go as well to the Legislative Counsel of the American Adoption Congress, Fred Greenman, for his advice.

The measure is scheduled to go into effect at 5:01 pm PDT today and requests for original birth certificates will start to be mailed out as soon as Wednesday, May 31st. To date over 2000 Oregon-born adopted citizens have applied for a copy of their original birth certificate under the law. A law upholding Measure 58 and signed by Governor Kitzhaber in 1998 allows for a Contact Preference Form to be attached to the original birth certificate so that a birth parent may make it known to the adoptee whether she or he would like contact, and to what degree. “



STARS OF DAVID REVAMPS AGENCY/ PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS, INCREASES MEMBER DUES

Due to rising administrative and postage costs, we will only be offering Information Packet packets to new members with their first year’s membership fee. Non-members will no

longer be able to obtain packets. The Board has voted to increase the fee for Agencies and Professionals who join our organization to \$125/year, effective June 1, 2000. Membership fees for individual members will be increasing as of January 1, 2001 after having remained the same for many years.

FACES OF CHANGE - MULTICULTURAL CHILDREN ADD A NEW DIMENSION TO AMERICAN JEWISH FAMILIES.



SHARON LUCKERMAN
 Editorial Assistant, *Detroit Jewish News*

Jan Adler recalls walking into a Star Bakery with her adopted Korean daughter Jineene. Then 5, Jineene stepped up to the counter and ordered a half-pound of kuchen. The man standing beside her asked with surprise, “You know what that is?” “Of course, I do,” Jineene replied, astonished by his question. “I’m Jewish.”

Most of us take our Jewishness for granted. We don’t have to define ourselves to others because of the way we look. But like it or not, the look of the modern Jewish family is changing at all levels of observance as more and more Jewish adoptive parents are turning to international adoptions.

These families want their children, who may look different or come from different religious upbringings but are being brought up Jewish, to be accepted by the community.

“Multiracial adoption forces everyone to think about what it means to be a Jew,” says Boston-area Reform Rabbi Susan Silverman. Last year, she and her husband adopted an infant from Ethiopia.

International adoptions in general are steadily rising in the United States, from 7,093 in 1990 to 16,396 in 1999, as reported this March in *The New York Times*. Though no statistical evidence exists for how many of these families are Jewish, all the experts interviewed for this story agree that Jewish adoption is on the rise. And more of these prospective parents are seeking foreign-born children, most notably from Asia, the former Soviet Union and Latin America.

Sometimes infertility becomes the catalyst for the adoption process. Infertility is estimated at 15% for all married couples in this country and even higher for educated Jewish couples who have put off having children. Most undertaking a foreign adoption, at some level, also are motivated by the notion of rescuing a child.

Since 1973, when *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion and birth control became more widespread, fewer healthy Caucasian infants have been available for adoption here. This, too, has prompted more prospective parents to start investigating international adoption as an alternative means to building their families.

Some go to the former Soviet Union because they want to return to the gene pool of their pasts. Others have political reasons to go abroad, preferring to raise a child already born, but with no parents. Still others fear the unclear legal rights of birth mothers in this country.

After the governmental red tape, the language barriers and the international flights that most foreign adoptions encompass, Jewish adoptive families face additional daily challenges. These range from concerns about the child's possible need for conversion and acceptance in the Jewish community, to issues surrounding the child's identity and how to integrate the birth culture alongside a Jewish upbringing. Some families need to be concerned with the effect of blending adopted children with biological ones and/or having their sons circumcised at an older age.

But the rewards of a foreign adoption, parents insist, far outweigh the challenges.

MAKING OF A MITZVAH

Anthony Ambrogio and his wife, Anca Vlasopolos of Grosse Pointe, had no thoughts of adopting a child. With a daughter, Olivia Ambrogio, in college, they were enjoying having more free time together. Then they read an article last year that motivated them to adopt Beatriz, an 11-year-old Guatemalan.

"The decision to adopt Beatriz is one of those hard things to explain," says Vlasopolos, 51, an English professor at Wayne State University in Detroit. "You hear terrible stories about children who are homeless and the image of a girl left behind in an orphanage made us want to do something if we could."

Their mitzvah was not only saving an orphan, but also reuniting siblings. Beatriz's younger brothers, Jose, 9,

and Gustavo, 3, were adopted earlier by Alice Audie-Figueroa and David Hecker of Huntington Woods. The Heckers, members of Congregation Shir Tikvah, hoped to find a home for their sons' sister through an article written about them in the former *Detroit Sunday Journal*.

The match has been satisfying on many levels. For Vlasopolos, it's brought an extended Jewish family. She has no Jewish relatives in this country since her mother, a Holocaust survivor, died 10 years ago.

"It's a mitzvah to raise someone else's child," explains Orthodox Rabbi Steven Weil of Young Israel of Oak Park. "The Talmud says that anyone who raises a child along halachic lines of a perfected Jewish life, it's as if they gave birth to that child."

Rabbi Elimelech Silberberg at Sara Tugman Bais Chabad Torah Center, and a member of the Presidium, Council of Orthodox Rabbis, offers a different interpretation. "The mitzvah is raising an orphan, and there is no higher accolade. But that has nothing to do with the types of adoption we do today."

To Rabbi Silberberg, a couple choosing to adopt because of their desire to have a child is not the same as taking in an orphaned child from the community.

But he acknowledges the great pain women suffer who can't have children and the void it can create in a Jewish couple's life.

The three couples who founded the Jewish faith — Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel — all struggled with infertility in their marriages.

Once a couple makes the decision to adopt, Rabbi Silberberg says he will counsel them in the process of conversion and the halachic tradition that embraces the laws of Judaism.

Not all rabbis are as willing to take a position on foreign-born adoption. Orthodox Rabbi Eliezer Cohen of Or Chadash says he has no thoughts on the issue and has had no contact with people in his synagogue who have adopted foreign-born children. Part of the ambiguity stems from unclear Jewish law.

"There is no word for adoption in classical Hebrew," states Conservative Rabbi Michael Gold of Temple Beth Torah in Tamarac, Fla., and the author of *And Hanna Wept*, a Jewish approach to infertility and adoption. "Adoption is a formal legal procedure

unknown in Jewish law because Jews put importance on bloodlines.

“Having said that,” he says, “I’m very pro-adoption — and have adopted three children — but with the full realization that when parents adopt they raise real issues in Jewish law, like, is my child Jewish?”

“The Jewish community is divided on what is required to become a Jew,” says Rabbi Gold. And that can be one of the most painful aspects of adoption. Whatever Jewish parents decide for their children always seems subject to interpretation by different streams of Judaism. To circumcise or not? To go to the mikva or not? To keep kosher or not? How Jewish is Jewish enough when you look so different?

For Rabbi Gold, the rule is clear. To be brought into his synagogue, he requires circumcision and immersion in a mikva. Because no mikva is available to him in Florida to convert adoptees, he uses the ocean.

NOT MY PLANTING, BUT MY HARVEST

“I have chosen to wear my traditional Korean hanbok [Korean dress] for this occasion,” Jineene Adler said at the opening of her secular bat mitzvah in 1989 with Workmen’s Circle/Arbeter Ring. “Since this is one of the most important days pertaining to the Jewish aspect of my life, I decided to bring part of my Korean heritage into it, too.”

Jineene went on to read a poem in Yiddish and in English and then presented her secular bat mitzvah project, a paper on The Jews of China.

Her mother, Jan Adler, the Workmen’s Circle Sunday school director, celebrates her family’s differences. She believes both parents and children are enriched in a multi-ethnic adoption. The Adler home is decorated with Korean pottery, folk art and costumes, coexisting harmoniously with Jewish artifacts, posters and children’s art projects.

“Love is not enough,” she says to parents considering a foreign adoption. “Parents have an obligation to the history and background of each culture, Jewish and the birth culture.”

At 23, Jineene is an engineer in California where she has recently rejoined Workmen’s Circle.

Jan and husband Jess also adopted their son Jeremy, 21, from Korea. He had a different way of relating to

his cultural heritage, reflected in his choices at 13. His bar mitzvah project in 1991 combined his love of sports, his Jewish-Korean heritage and the experience of prejudice by a minority. In his presentation, he talked about two-time Olympic diver Dr. Sammy Lee, who wasn’t allowed to train in the same pool as whites, and Harold Abrahams, the Jewish runner celebrated in the film *Chariots of Fire*.

“You can’t force culture down a child’s throat. You just have to make it available,” says Adler, herself adopted during an era when children were “matched” to look like their adopted parents. She always knew she would adopt, and when local babies were difficult to find in the late ’70s, she and her husband were among the first Jewish couples in the area to adopt from Korea. They became pioneers in the process and went on to teach ethnic awareness workshops for the Americans for International Services, an adoption aid agency.

“A child’s birth culture is always a positive thing,” says Diane St. Peter, director of adoption at the Southfield-based Jewish Family Service and its Alliance for Adoption division. “It’s important to instill an equal amount of pride in both Judaism and in the culture where the child is from.

“Being part of a non-traditional family does not make you not traditional. It just opens you up to traditions of more than one culture.”

INSTILLING JUDAISM

As a child grows older, issues not specific to adoption arise, but may require extra sensitivity by the adoptive parents.

Though even a biological child, for example, will say, “I’m not interested in Hebrew school,” when it’s your adopted child who says it, there’s another layer of the kid expressing his thought that “I’m not really Jewish.”

“It’s very important to acknowledge and be honest that your child was not born Jewish. Be careful not to get into power struggles with your child at this time,” advises Linda Yellin, M.S.W., A.C.S.W. The Farmington Hills counselor is recognized internationally as an authority on adoption.

“This is what we believe,” Yellin would have parents say to the child. “We want you to have this education and when you’re an adult you can make your own decision about what religion you want.”

Steve Krausz, president of the Jewish Children's Adoption Network (JCAN), in Denver, Colo., met a Jewish couple at a conference who were upset when the Chinese boy they adopted 18 years ago decided to become a Buddhist. Krausz says he told them, "You shouldn't be surprised. He looks in the mirror and he's a Buddhist. You gave him a good life; don't fret."

Rabbi Michael Gold holds a different view. "In theory, a child has a choice [at 18]. But in practice, going through a bar or bat mitzvah is a reaffirmation of that conversion. I recognize that my children had a life before they came in my house. I can't erase that, but now, I say, 'You are a Jew.'"

The future of foreign-born children adopted by Jews concerns Rabbi Gold.

"Remember, that delightful baby will become a teenager and an adult someday," he says. Even though a child has had a proper conversion, he may still grow up to face issues of acceptance at Hebrew school and in Jewish youth groups.

"Judaism is not a race," he emphasizes. "We've grown used to the differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews, but it will still take time for attitudes to change toward some of the newer converts." Rabbi Steven Weil says, "Judaism does not discriminate between *ezrach*, someone born Jewish, and *ger*, someone who chooses to become a Jew. All human beings are created equal in the image of God."

There were periods in Jewish history, he adds, when religious leaders were converts. In the Roman times, a nephew of Caesar, Onkelos, converted to Judaism, "and we still read his explanation of the Bible — the *Targum*, an Aramaic translation into Hebrew which includes commentary — every week."

SO YOU WANT TO ADOPT?

"There are a million books on adoption," says Krausz of JCAN. "Read them all. Make your own decision about what's right for you. There are no right or wrong answers. Most failed adoptions are when people adopt unrealistically."

Krausz and his wife Vicky, director of JCAN, are matchmakers. They place about 100 Jewish children a year in Jewish homes. About 85 percent of their children have special needs; they've been abused, neglected or abandoned. The Krauszes themselves have adopted two children with Down Syndrome.

Rose Williams is director of Morningstar Adoption Agency in Royal Oak, the agency used by the Audie-Figueroa-Hecker family. She wants prospective parents to know that the adoption process can be overwhelming.

"Adoption opens an entire new universe with jargon and paperwork," she says. "Educate yourself even before networking with agencies and attorneys."

"Call us!" invites Diane St. Peter to Jews considering a foreign adoption. She is director of adoption for the Jewish Family Service's division, Alliance for Adoption. Licensed and regulated by the state of Michigan, JFS places children into foster care or for adoption. It also advises families on the legitimacy of other placement agencies.

Another resource the experts recommend is the Stars of David.

"We are a group of Jewish and part-Jewish families," says Rosa Schindler, president of the Detroit chapter. She and her husband Richard Ng have adopted two children from Korea.

"We do social activities, educational programs on adoption and discussion groups. But we're more a *chavura*, a family, than a support group." Comprised of 35 to 40 families, the group also invites people who are considering adoption to join them.

THE ADOPTION MAZE

"I had no idea the infra-structure around adoption was so daunting," says Alice Audie-Figueroa, wife of David Hecker. "Yet every time things got tough, someone popped up who opened their heart to us, like doctors or travel agents."

When the Heckers realized the difficulty in finding a child to adopt locally, they extended their search beyond the United States. They chose Latin America because Alice's mother was from Venezuela and, at the time, Guatemala had simpler adoption procedures.

For Vlasopolos and Ambrogio, before the Guatemalan government would even begin legal proceedings in their courts, the couple had to process 18 documents. Each had to be notarized, then sent to Wayne County for verification, mailed to the Guatemalan Consulate in Chicago for authentication, and finally returned to their adoption agency in Oklahoma, who forwarded all the documents to Guatemala along with the couple's dossier.

They expect their new daughter Beatriz to arrive in June.

It's hard to imagine the ordeal one Farmington Hills family went through in their quest to adopt daughter Anna, then 3½ from the Ukraine, and son Jonah, 5, from Albania.

In her cheery Farmington Hills kitchen, Jacqueline Fox details her and husband Frank Hoffman's chaotic year trying to adopt their foreign-born children, speaking as biological daughter Jordana, 7, and a friend twirl around in tutus. Anna, almost 5, is at a birthday party and Jonah, almost 6, snuggles in his mother's lap.

Fox's story includes American agencies that "misrepresented everything," an incompetent home study, lost fingerprints and unsuccessful attempts to get congressmen to step in to get their stalled Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) application approved.

Despite these hassles, the family finally found a wonderful adoption agency called the International Children's Alliance in Washington D.C., and some "fabulous people in Kiev and Sebastopol."

In this seaport outside of Kiev where they would meet their future daughter, Anna, they had a translator at all times. They gave "gifts" — leather goods, toiletries and money — to their representative to distribute as necessary.

Despite their harrowing experience with bureaucracy, the Hoffmans went on to adopt Jonah in Albania only 11 months later.

Aside from the extensive emotional investment, foreign adoption also carries a high financial component. The people interviewed for this article spent between \$10,000 and \$30,000 to process their adopted child, including payment to organizations caring for the child, transportation and other expenses to meet the child in a foreign country.

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

With all the drama surrounding the adoption of a child, each parent still has a special "first sight" story.

"We were sitting in the director's office when we first saw Anna," Jacqueline Fox says. "She wore a blue-and-white pinafore with a big white bow in her very short hair. Frank held out his arms and she walked right up to him and let him pick her up. At that point, I knew we were adopting Anna."

On first seeing Gustavo at age 2½, Audie-Figueroa says, "Love was automatic. It's the amazing thing and makes no difference whether you get a child from a physical act of love or out of the act of love filling out papers. They're your kid."

Stars of David President Schindler says, "Before seeing my child, I worried, 'Will my child like me? Will I like my child?'" But once her 4-month-old child arrived at the airport, it was total unconditional love.

LIFE BECOMES DIFFERENT

"When adopting there are gains and losses for all in the family — parents, grandparents and children — not just the adopted child," says Linda Yellin, the adoption counselor. "This isn't good or bad, it's just a reality."

For example, sibling readjustment in homes with a biological child, like the Heckers and the Hoffmans, requires special understanding.

Ask Joelle Hecker, 11, what it's like having two new brothers and she's quick to reply: "Less attention."

So what's the good part?

"Less attention!" interjects her mother Alice, before Joelle can answer. Both of them laugh, but there's some truth to it. Joelle's late-night reading in bed when she should be asleep, is possible, she says, because her parents are busy caring for her younger brothers.

The adoptee also experiences gains and losses, which for a foreign-born child, may be reflected in their experiences at school or in learning a new language.

Jonah Hoffman lived in an Albanian orphanage before he was adopted. Though the nuns were very loving, his mother Jacqueline Fox explains, they never disciplined the children. That made adjustment at school here difficult for their son. "Jonah didn't know about lining up or circle time," she says.

"Let alone how to hold a pencil," Frank Hoffman adds.

A few months after Jose Hecker arrived here, he and his new family visited his birth sister Letti, 10, who had been adopted by a South Carolinian family. Jose, who spoke only Spanish, was unable to talk with Letti, who by then had forgotten her native tongue. Jose at first was hesitant to learn English for fear he'd forget

Spanish, too. He wants to be able to talk to his sister Beatriz when she arrives next month.

“It’s not necessary for a child to give up his language to learn another,” Yellin says. She suggests that the adoptive family learn words in their son or daughter’s native language — nicknames or expressions — and keep some familiar foods in the house.

Good post-adoption support is necessary, says Yellin, who adds that some therapists specialize in adoption issues.

ACCEPTANCE AND UNDERSTANDING

For many, adopting a child also triggers grief at the inability to have a biological child.

Yellin says, “The community needs to know that they inadvertently add to a family’s hurt by saying things like, ‘Too bad you don’t have your own children’ or ‘Are their real parents dead? Are they really yours?’”

Luckily, Jewish adoptive parents know these comments are usually made out of ignorance, not malice.

“The Jews are the original ‘family values’ people,” says Carolyn McPherson, former dean of students at the Michigan Jewish Institute in Oak Park. She facilitated a 1993 Michigan report on Jewish adoption.

In keeping with longstanding tradition, she finds the Jewish sense of family and of responsibility for helping children without parents transcends geographic boundaries.

“All adoption,” says Rabbi Gold, “is about building Jewish families...and the family is still the most important element of Jewish life”

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THE PARENT CONNECTION

[Editor’s Note: As part of our expanding focus, STAR TRACKS is instituting a column where members can personally reach out for a friend, mentor or experienced voice]

The following STARS members are interested in making contact with other members with similar interests:

A father of 4, ranging in age from 6 to 13, is interested in communicating with other similarly situated parents, particularly those with older Asian adopted children, to inquire specifically if they enjoy/relate to/practice Judaism. Please call Laurence at (207) 774-3664.

A family in Massachusetts is interested in speaking with people who have adopted from Lithuania, Romania, Russia, Kazakstan or Slovakia; or have experience with the following agencies: in Massachusetts, Alliance for Children, MAPS, Wide Horizons, Adoption Resource Center at Brightside, American-International Children’s Alliance; in Maryland, Adoption Together; in Georgia, Ilien; or in New York, Happy Families. Please contact Sharon or Ed at (508) 877-9584.



AdoptShoppe (www.adoptshoppe.com) - the Web’s premier site for adoption related gifts, books, and resources – recently added a line of adoption-themed mezuzahs. These three exclusive designs - ladybug, multicultural kids, and teddy bear with airplane - are hand-painted on white ceramic scroll cases. FREE

PERSONALIZATION! Child’s name will be added in gold lettering at no extra charge. Cost is \$65 each, plus \$3.50 shipping/handling and MD sales tax. Contact Roberta Rosenberg, ShoppeOwner and Adoptive Mom at roberta@adoptshoppe.com for more details.

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LESBIAN AND GAY ADOPTION

FIRST OF TWO PARTS

By Arlene (Ari) Istar Lev CSW-R, CASAC

The adoption of every child represents a miracle of sorts for the adoptive family. For lesbian and gay people becoming parents it is an extra special kind of miracle. In a world that has often deemed gay people as unfit to be parents, the rise of lesbian and gay families — through pregnancy, surrogacy, adoption and fostering — heralds in the beginning of a new era. Lesbian and gay people choose adoption for the same reasons as do other potential parents. For many people adoption is their first choice in becoming parents, and for others adoption follows years of infertility treatments. Adoption is commonly a path to parenthood for gay men, especially those unable to afford a surrogacy arrangement or are unwilling or unable to find a co-parenting arrangement with a woman willing to carry a child. Lesbians are choosing adoption as a means to parenthood in increasing numbers. Since many gay and lesbian people do not begin to their families till they are older, infertility issues often impede plans to have biological children.

Adoption is a viable and exciting way for lesbian and gay people to bring children into their lives. Many people believe that it is not “possible” for lesbians and gays to adopt, but there are many agencies and policies that are very supportive to gay and lesbian people adopting. In 1988 The Child Welfare League of America developed a policy statement that clearly stated “Gay/lesbian adoptive applicants should be assessed the same as any other adoptive applicants. It should be recognized that sexual orientation and the capacity to nurture a child are separate issues.”

While there are states that actively ban gays and lesbians from adopting or having foster children, there are also states that have actively pursued gay and lesbian placements for gay youth, as well as states that have made explicit statements the secure gays and lesbians the right to pursue parenthood. More and more states are recognizing the existence of gay and lesbian families, and due to the advent of domestic partnership rulings, and same-sex second-parent adoptions, gay and lesbian families are beginning to receive legal protections. These issues are continually re-visited in courtrooms around the country, but the ability to pursue adoption as out gay people increases

all the time, as does the potential to secure our families through second-parent adoption, and judicial decisions that recognize “psychological parenting” and the “intention” to parent together. Laws protecting gay and lesbian families remain a major focus of all civil rights organizing at the beginning of the 21st century.

When examining the issues involved in single gay and lesbian adoption issues, there are two situations that need to be examined. The first involves the gay or lesbian person who is single and seeking an adoption. In many ways, being single alleviates many of the obstacles that lesbian and gay couples pursuing adoption are faced with. Although there of course hurdles that all single men and women must confront in the adoption system, rarely does the nature of ones sexual orientation become an issue during a homestudy process. Single lesbian and gay people are often simply assumed to be single heterosexuals. Of course invisibility has a price of its own, but if a single gay man or lesbian wanted to remain private about their sexual orientation during a homestudy and adoptive process, it could prove easy to accomplish.

However, the expression “single parent” is often a euphemism used by a gay or lesbian couple who are seeking adoption, but cannot risk being out about their relationship. Due to the nature of homophobia, and the lack of recognition of gay and lesbian “marriages,” many children adopted by “single” parents are actually being adopted by gay and lesbian couples whose relationships are not legally recognized. Many states explicitly bar gays and lesbians from adopting so that many couples choose to present as single men and women. The price of being closeted, and the daily fears of being found out, while awaiting the finalization of an adoption can bring enormous stress onto the family.

Whether a gay person is actually single or partnered but needing to present as single, surviving the adoption process with one’s sanity in tact can be a challenge. The adoption system is a bit of a quagmire, and certainly no more easily negotiated for gays and lesbians than other parents.

There are many avenues available when pursuing adoption, including domestic and international choices, private or public agencies and infant or older child adoptions. Whatever path is chosen, the adoption process hinges on a homestudy. Probably there is nothing more important for anyone pursuing an adoption that having a homestudy completed. There is certainly nothing more important to the

homestudy process than having it completed by a competent social worker who has experience working with gay and lesbian families.

Sadly, this may be difficult to find.

[Editor's Note: In Part II, we will read about selecting the friendliest agencies and conducting the homestudies]

About the author: Arlene (Ari) Istar Lev CSW-R, CASAC is a social worker and family therapist who specializes in working with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities. She is also a lesbian transracially adoptive mom to Shaiyah Ben and Eliezer Ranon. She can be reached at Choices Counseling and Consulting, 321 Washington Ave., Albany New York, 12206, or at istarlev@aol.com or www.choicesconsulting.com. Ari has an advice column for Alternative Family Magazine and you can access her article on Lesbian and Gay Parenting at <http://www.altfammag.com/lev.htm>. She is also a columnist for www.lesbianation.com.

THE YOUNG ADOPTEE IN SCHOOL - PART II

By Nancy Golden



This is the second in a series of articles focusing on the adopted child in school. My last column highlighted ways to help your child get off to a good start. This column will address the issue of sharing information about your child's adoptive status with school personnel.

Where do you stand on this issue? Before reading further, consider your own position and on what information your decision will be or has been made. For readers with school-aged children, write down on paper how you came to a decision regarding sharing information about your family's adoptive status. Include details of what you actually did, and how it has gone so far. For readers awaiting placement or those with preschoolers, record any decisions you have come to so far, and how you are thinking about the issue at this time. It is a good idea for you and your partner to work separately. Often there are very different ideas within the partnership and these differences may not be apparent until recorded in black and white.

Adoptive parents often feel conflicted when faced with school forms, including pre-registration and medical forms. There is also much indecision over whether or not to share information about the family's adoptive

status with teachers. In my experience, Jewish families may be particularly reluctant to give personal information in a written format. My grandparents were quite concerned about "the government" knowing details about our family members. While I often scoffed at their attitudes, I also recognize that my generation may have "heard" and been impacted in some significant manner by their message.

Basically, there are two schools of thinking regarding sharing information. One group of parents fear that teachers will make assumptions about their child based on what they think they know about children who are adopted. They worry that academic standards may be lowered and a wide range of behavioral problems blamed on their child's adoptive status. These concerns override other considerations and the choice is made not to share the information. A second group of parents believe that giving this information allows them to become a team player with the school in providing the best experience for their child.

I guess it boils down to what kind of risk you are willing to accept. If you choose to withhold information, you take the chance that teachers will not need to know about how your child entered your family. You are gambling that when your child is faced with difficult assignments, such as autobiographies, family trees, family timelines, projects focusing on heredity, genetics or ethnic origin issues, his teacher will somehow "know" that this material may be especially sensitive for some of the students. On the other hand, if you choose to share adoption related information, you run the risk that teachers may make assumptions about your child because of misconceptions or personal bias.

I believe that in order to be an advocate for your child, and to participate in a team approach with your child's school and his teacher, you must give information that will allow school personnel to best meet the needs of your child. Unfortunately, there are many stories of assumptions made and information misconstrued and these "sagas" continue to make adoptive families uneasy and afraid to call attention to themselves and their children.

What I hear parents saying is that they hope to discourage generalizations about their child that could be advanced by school personnel who misuse information about the child's adoptive status. Writing "it" down on school forms may feel particularly risky as the parents are unsure as to who will read the form and how the information will be used. I always

encourage parents to ask lots of questions along the way. Find out what happens to the forms and who sees them. Ask how this information will be used.

Lois Melina in her book, “Talking About Adoption”, notes her amazement at finding a question on an application for her two year old’s preschool that asked, “Is the child adopted?” After the initial shock of the day-care center’s question wore off, the author states that she realized that a child’s adoptive status is part of his social history and that schools need to know the social histories of their students.

Finally, I encourage you to think about what is being modeled for your child when you do not tell people who need to know about your family’s adoptive status. Is adoption something to be hidden? Does that mean being adopted really isn’t OK? Being adopted and being part of an adoptive family is something that your child and you will need to confront, discuss, and work through together throughout life. It is real. And it can be problematic. But remember, the best way to protect your child from pain, pain that can be far more detrimental, is to teach them about it, by talking together and figuring out how to cope with situations when they come up. The bottom line is that dealing with difficult issues like adoption enhances the attachment between you and your child. The bond is strengthened and each of you is stronger from having worked through it together.

My next column will focus on ways to educate school personnel about adoption issues.

KESHET THE JEWISH RAINBOW

By Dorothy Heller

When almost anyone thinks of “Jewish,” what comes to mind? Typically, it’s Shalom Aleichem, matzo balls, klezmer, Yiddish, chicken soup—all of which point to Eastern or Central European origins. Jews, however, have always come in all kinds of colors and from all kinds of places—the Middle East, Northern Africa, Ethiopia, India, China, the Mediterranean, Latin America. A rainbow—*Keshet* in Hebrew—arches over the Stars of David—the Jews of color. This column is a place for multiracial families and for Jews of color—by birth, by choice, by adoption, by marriage—to briefly discuss and exchange information, experiences, and ideas.

JEWISH RESEARCH COUNCIL EXPLORES JEWS OF COLOR

The San Francisco-based Jewish Research Council has launched a nationwide study of Jews of Color. Gary and Diane Tobin, adoptive parents of their African-American son, are in the process of completing Phase One.

“Our first questions were to identify the landscape,” says researcher Diane Tobin. “Who is out there? What do they need?”

The Tobins have identified four distinct groups with different needs and perspectives:

- ... Sephardic/Mizrahi Jews
- ... Jewish Adoptive families
- ... Jews of choice
- ... Jews in interracial marriages and their biracial children.

All the groups share a need for networking and better communications. Of the four groups, the adoptive community has the best-developed network.

Phase Two of the study will focus on the services that Jews of Color need and how the Jewish community can deliver these services.

The one question the study can’t answer is “how many?” Since participation in the study is voluntary, the information collected is anecdotal rather than statistical.

Gary Tobin is working with the Jewish Population Study, which takes place every ten years, to include questions about color. Tobin also plans to do an additional phone survey.

The Jewish Research Council has already hosted presentations in San Francisco of Sephardic, African-American, and Asian Jews, to be discussed in future columns.

One outgrowth of the study may be a West Coast Multiracial Jewish Conference, based at Camp Towanga, to expand the conference held every year on the East Coast.

To share your experiences and information with the Jews of Color study, call Diane Tobin in San Francisco, California at (415) 386-2604 or email diane@jewishresearch.org

[Editor’s Note: To share comments, suggestions, and information with this column, contact the editor or email Dorothy Heller at Dorothy@ibsystems.com]

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