

Jews And Adoption

By MARSHA RIBEN

The accounts are factual, but names have been changed to protect identities.

Harold M. Jacobs, president of the National Council of Young Israel recently addressed the issue of declining Jewish population in Israel. Listed among his many suggestions was the suggestion of promoting more adoptions. Similarly, within the United States, the Reagan administration also sees adoption as a goal to promote, to stem the rising abortion rate. Is adoption an option that Jewish people, in this country and in Israel, should promote?

In order to answer, we must first investigate adoption as it is currently practiced and as it affects our people. Adoption touches the lives of Jewish people in many ways. Numbered among our people are adoptive parents, adopted persons, and birth parents:

Lynn was a "good Jewish girl." Lynn was also single and pregnant. Her parents insisted upon adoption. Four years later, Lynn's child from her subsequent marriage died of Tay-Sachs. She does not know if her first child is dead or alive. If he is alive, the agency who handled the adoption in 1982 refuses to "disrupt" his adoptive family to inform them that he might be a carrier.

Fern and her fiancé were both from Orthodox homes. Her parents were mortified when she informed them that she was pregnant. They insisted that the child be adopted. They consulted with their Rabbi and the head of a prominent Jewish adoption agency. Years later, Fern searched and found that her child had been placed in a Christian home.

David was raised in a Jewish home. He was educated as a Jew and was *Bar Mitzvah*. But because Jewish law taught David that you are only Jewish if born of a Jewish mother, David wonders if he is

"really" Jewish. David is receiving counselling in a residential drug treatment center, but feels he cannot rest until he finds the truth of his identity.

Edith has a grandchild who she believes would be 25 now. She is not sure if the child is dead or alive. She has never seen her only granddaughter, though she has two grandsons. There is a deep scar in an otherwise loving relationship with her daughter, whom she encouraged to relinquish the child. "If only I had known then. Saving family is so much more important than saving face."

Moshe and Zelda were among twenty Israeli couples detained by Brazilian officials in connection with a black-market baby ring. All of the couples were released as having not known that the babies they were so desperate to adopt had been obtained illegally by women who posed as social workers.

Deborah surrendered her firstborn child to adoption through a reputable agency in 1984, according to the wishes of her family. One year later, married, Deborah delivered a healthy male child. That child almost died three times during the first year due to SIDS. Had Deborah been informed that her firstborn has the same life-threatening syndrome, her second child would have been placed on a monitor immediately.

Barry was a happily married man with two children until last year, when at the age of thirty-seven he felt as if his whole life fell apart. He discovered that he was adopted. When he confronted his parents, they said that they had thought it best not to tell him. They assured him that his original parents were Jewish. But upon investigation he found that his natural father, and not his natural mother, was Jewish. He and his wife are both upset that their lives and that of their

children were based upon lies.

Carl and Heddy pray every day that the sealed adoption records will be opened in time for them to obtain a medical history for their terminally ill adopted daughter.

Carol thinks that she is Jewish, but is not sure. She was raised a Jew, but everyone tells her she looks Irish with her red hair and tiny nose. Married one year, she has great concerns and misgivings about having children. "I think about getting pregnant and I think about having 'Rosemary's Baby' — carrying some creature of unknown genetics inside of me. Then there's simple questions, like should I be tested for Jewish genetic diseases, or other ethnic-related ones?"

Because our governments are "pro-adoption," we are subjected to a great deal of rhetoric regarding the joys of adoption:

— Adoption builds families.

— Children have a "better" life with married couples who can afford to give them more advantages than single mothers.

— Youth should not be interrupted by the responsibilities of parenting. Child rearing should come later.

— There are so many couples desperate to adopt and so few babies available.

— Education or careers should be completed, not interrupted.

Adoption is painted as a rosy picture where everyone lives happily ever after. For many, adoption produces these promised goals. Unfortunately, this is not the case for everyone. Despite government promotion of adoption, thousands of children in this country wait in foster and group homes for permanent families while "desperate" infertile couples adopt from overseas. In addition to this sad imbalance, current adoption regulations have also left their mark on many whose lives are irrevocably changed by it:

David, Carol and Barry are examples of the sad reality that adoptees are over

represented in therapy. While only two percent of the population is adopted, 25% of adolescents in treatment facilities are adopted. Betty Jean Lifton, adoptee and author, finds that adoptees often feel a basic sense of rejection, no matter how much love they receive in their adoptive homes. Adoptees often report feeling rootless, not whole, as if "a piece were missing." Add to this the particular aspect of Jewish identity which is so closely linked to blood lines. Another of David's fears — not uncommon among adopted persons — is that of unknowingly marrying a sibling or cousin.

Fern and Edith exemplify the "new life" that adoption creates for many relinquishing parents. While well-meaning parents and professionals have long believed that removing the evidence of indiscretion would free single women to "get on" with their lives, it has now been documented that women who surrender their children to adoption do not "forget" but rather experience life-long trauma. Separate studies by Ryneason and Roll reveal ongoing, unresolvable grief suffered by many birthmothers. A study by Deykin, *et al*, revealed the negative effects of adoption on the birthparents' later lives, including difficulty with future relationships and difficulty parenting subsequent children. In addition, women who surrender their firstborn to adoption are now known to have a significantly higher rate of infertility than the national average. Thus, no woman can be assured, "You can always have another." This new evidence also negates the proposed idea (presented by Harold Jacobs) that adoption will increase the declining Jewish population in Israel.

(To be continued)

About The Author

Marsha Riben is a freelance writer who has had several published articles on parenting. She is author of the forthcoming book, "shedding light on...The Dark Side of Adoption."

