



**"The Future of Family and Tribe,"** a seminar of CLAL's Jewish Public Forum held January 28-29, 2002 in New York City, brought together a dozen leading thinkers on gender, gay rights, adoption, reproductive law, bioethics, and aging. **eCLAL** is publishing a series of articles based on participants' contributions to the seminar.

This seminar was part of **Exploring the Jewish Futures: A Multidimensional Project On the Future of Religion, Ethnicity and Civic Engagement.**

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## **Adoption**

**By Adam Pertman**

Adoption is transforming the demographics of American families. My research indicates that between 80 and 100 million Americans have adoption in their immediate families (extending to and including first cousins). These numbers will increase if current patterns continue. Even if the numbers level off—and there is no indication that they will—the impact of adoption on this nation's families will remain significant for years to come. For instance, a steadily escalating percentage of all new adoptees are coming from the U.S. foster care system and from orphanages in other nations. This means that a growing majority of these boys and girls are not of the same race, ethnicity or nationality as their predominantly Caucasian parents, and thus that the families of the future will be the products of much more complicated ethnic and racial mixing than ever before.

I believe that the intellectual, ethical, cultural and practical implications of the adoption boom are profound, though they have received little, if any, consideration from serious thinkers or policy-makers. Like other broad societal

shifts—the decline in traditional, heterosexual, two-parent homes; the accompanying growth in single, gay, step and other alternative family models; the impending ascendancy of ethnic and racial minorities to majority population status across the United States—adoption will, I believe, help redefine the institution of “family,” making it clear that there are many legitimate ways a family can be formed.

On the broadest level, I expect we will see expanded research into, and therefore greater understanding of, the balance between nurture and nature in human development. In part because of the secrecy and stigma historically attached to adoption, adoptive families have been largely overlooked in clinical and academic studies. As that changes, we will develop better insights with a wide range of applications to personal life, medical practice – especially in areas such as new reproductive technology – and public policy relating to vexing issues including infant abandonment.

Adoption’s most dramatic impact, I believe, will be on the lives of individuals and the groups (or “tribes”) of which they are a part. In years to come, for instance, virtually all American children will have among their acquaintances at least one or two adoptees who don’t look anything like their parents. Historically entrenched concepts such as “blood ties” or “bloodlines,” which so often define group belonging, will assume less and less importance in Americans’ minds. Indeed, when enough of the people we all know are not genetically related to their relatives, we are not only likely to change our opinions but also our laws relating to such processes as inheritance.

New understandings of immediate families—of the relations between parents, siblings, and children—will change how we define “extended families” as well, and the distinctions within them. In many adoptive families, birth mothers already are perceived and treated as relatives and, increasingly, the same is becoming true for biological fathers and siblings as well. In the longer term, I believe, all these blood kin of adoptees will come to be regarded in much the same way as in-laws are now.

If adoption shifts our ideas about families, it will also reshape the wider social realm—the communities and institutions to which families belong. Most families formed by international adoption over the last decade, for instance, have integrated the culture, language and customs of their children’s native lands into their own lives. The complex, important question for the future is how this will reshape our societal landscape. To what extent will social institutions, such as synagogues, churches, or schools, follow suit in order to accommodate the needs, desires and demands of those they serve? Might we see an increasing number of American synagogues, for instance, begin to integrate rituals that reflect the cultures of, say, China or Guatemala, when enough synagogue members have adopted children from such places?

I suggest that social institutions will make such changes to a sizable extent, and that in so doing will garner publicity that probably will accelerate the trend's spread, first into similar institutions and then into others that adapt the model to suit their own realities. Such changes are likely to begin slowly, often first when people with significant sway within institutions (such as rabbis, ministers, teachers, administrators or important financial donors) who themselves are the parents of adopted children from other ethnicities or races insist on adjustments in traditional ceremonies.

This is likely to occur initially in the most progressive institutions (and indeed has already done so in many without fanfare). Once it does, other institutions will take note of the ways adoption has reshaped the families they serve. It may be that people within them increasingly make the case for "fairness" or "comparable treatment" regarding adoptive families, or simply that institutional leaders decide, once the issue clearly has hit the mainstream, that they need to make changes. And perhaps some leaders will come to view specific changes as a means of drawing additional members, participants, consumers, or constituents.

Adoption has been a secret for most of its history in our country, and it is very hard to learn anything about—or from—secrets. Now, finally, this large and important phenomenon is emerging from the shadows. It is long past time that we start learning its lessons. It seems clear to me that social, economic, and cultural analysts should be studying adoption's role as a matter of course—as they do so many other parts of society that include far fewer participants and have far fewer effects on all of our lives.

Despite what seems an increasing popular recognition of the important role adoption plays in so many people's lives, however, interest on the part of institutions that examine our present and shape our future—major think tanks, academic facilities, journalistic enterprises and other such venues—has remained surprisingly low. But I think and hope that it is possible that some foundation or other organization will make serious research into adoption part of a broader mission, for instance the study of alternative families more generally.

Sometimes, when I speak to groups around the country about my view of adoption's impact, I am asked—skeptically—whether I truly believe it is having as revolutionary an effect as I contend. My answer is usually long and full of statistics and arguments. But a remarkable event occurred recently that has provided me with an example that helps me make my point more succinctly. Though it comes from a context outside the US, the following story suggests the kind of developments we can expect to see here as well.

In February 2002, the Israeli Supreme Court issued a controversial ruling that is reverberating throughout the world, generating heated debate and certain to have a permanent impact on the profoundly emotional question—and in Israel, especially, a crucial legal question linked to the very definition of citizenship—of

“Who is a Jew?” The court ordered authorities in Israel to recognize conversions performed by Reform and Conservative rabbis; previously only Orthodox rabbis could carry out the procedure. People unfamiliar with the issue might not immediately grasp the magnitude of the ruling, which may seem at first to be merely about the fine points of religious practice. But the historic import of the case is greater than that. In what sort of case was this extraordinary judicial ruling rendered? One that involved a child whose parents had her converted in London, by a non-Orthodox rabbi, during a stopover on the way back to Israel. The couple was bringing their daughter home from Guatemala, where they had adopted her.

My point is this: Adoption is, and will continue to be, connected to sweeping changes we are only beginning to understand. It reshapes our families, true, but has the power as well to make us think and act differently about our institutions, our beliefs, and our nations.