

## Where Did I Come From?

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By Michael Schatz

*“Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your G-d my G-d.” (Ruth, 1:16, Jewish Publication Society translation). Megillat Ruth, traditionally read on Shavuot, can be understood on so many levels. Jews by choice look upon her as a role model. Adoptive children of any nation may also look upon her as a model of an adopted child of Naomi, her mother in law, but the mother with whom she sojourned even after the death of her husband.*

An adult who was adopted as an infant finds the answer to life’s first question.

What this is not: this is not a how-to guide for finding one’s biological parents. This is not a story of adolescent anguish, of a search for “real” parents, or a horror story filled with rejection or unexplained atrocities. What it is: just a story of a regular person who, rather easily, found answers, and of the regular people whose lives were not bad to start, but were ever so much more fulfilled as a result.

This is my story. I am forty years old, and was adopted soon after birth. I had a loving family and never, not even for a moment, doubted that they were my “real” family: parents, siblings, grandparents, large extended family. People who “knew” told me I was the most well adjusted adopted person they had ever met. I don’t remember being told I was adopted. I just always knew, like I knew I was a boy, or was Jewish, or that my name was Michael. I had some semblance of a story about why I was adopted. This very brief story involved my parents, and why they wanted to have a child, and these other people, whose names I didn’t know, who had one that they couldn’t take care of. I took that story in and never really questioned it.

Fast forward 32 years. I am married, and the father of a four year old girl who looks like me and a two year old boy who looks like his mother. I began to wonder who else they looked like. What other genes did I have, and did I just pass on, and who else is out there that is connected to us? My wife persisted. She wanted to know. What about medical history? What about genetic diseases? As a fairly observant Jew, I wanted to confirm my Jewishness. I was adopted through Jewish Family Service. But was I really Jewish? People used to tell me “you don’t look Jewish.” They also told me how much I resembled my mom (adoptive) and sister (not biological), and more recently how much my daughter looked like my sister. I was more religious than anyone else in my family. Why? I was so much like them in other ways- was it nature and coincidental or nurture? My parents told me that the agency tried to match similar traits, like shortness, of adoptive parents and biological parents. But at 5 feet seven inches I towered over my adoptive parents.

I knew a woman at Jewish Family Service who worked with adoption. I called her and told her my story. She said she thought she could help me; that the records should exist if I was adopted through JFS. She called me the next day and said she found the records. She couldn’t tell me the names, but if she were able to find my biological mother and she wanted to hear from me, then

she could make the match. She did send me certain pieces of information taken at the time of my birth. It confirmed that my biological parents were Jewish, that they were 17 years old, that their parents were American born but their grandparents were immigrants from Russia. My biological mother had a sister and brother, was five feet tall, had brown hair and hazel eyes, and her grandparents lived into their eighties. Sally, the woman at JFS, thought it was possible, even 32 years later, to find my biological mother, if I wanted, because she had a somewhat unusual last name, and that name was found in the local telephone book. I still wasn't sure I wanted to make any contact, but after reading the information she sent, I conceded to my wife's persistence. Sally called the number and asked for Rhoda, that's my biological mother's name, claiming to be a friend from college. They were her parents, and gave Sally the number. She did, in fact want to hear from me, and the next day I called her.

This story has other players. My adoptive parents (moving forward we'll call them my parents). My mom came from a large and warm extended Jewish family. There was probably infertility going back generations. My grandmother only had two children; my aunt was born six years after my mom. Grandmom's sister only had one child. Neither my mom's sister nor her cousin ever had children. My parents were both first generation college educated, and they married in 1963. I guess they started trying to get pregnant pretty soon after, because by 1967 they got to the top of the list and received a phone call in the late fall that there was a baby boy they could take home. That was me. When I was almost three years old I remember going with my parents to an apartment above a toy store, it turns out it was the apartment of the secretary of a lawyer, to pick up my brother. About five years later, when my mom was 35, my parents got a surprise, which they did not expect, and my sister, their only biological child, and the only child born to any female in that generation of my mom's family was born.

I recall as a child being fussed over by many aunts and uncles, and always felt secure within my nuclear family as well. I think it was in this context that I felt I belonged and never once questioned who I was, nor needed to go in search of my biological family.

When I was young I suppose I told people I was adopted because little kids always say whatever is on their minds. So friends from elementary school just knew. Later on, when kids want desperately to not be different, I really didn't talk about it. Being adopted was private. It also didn't seem very important. I imagine that is different for adopted children who aren't white, or who weren't born Jewish, because the differences appear more significant on the surface. I remember in high school when I was a senior and my brother was a freshman, people would take a look at him and say that someone must be adopted. Not only does he look nothing like me, he is a total opposite in every way. Sometimes I guess I would just laugh off what was probably intended as a joke, but other times, as I gained confidence, I would tell them. In the years when I worked at a Jewish overnight camp, as a young adult, I had more confidence and would talk about being adopted more openly. I even had friends who were adopted and we would have that bond. My sister was a camper at the time, and I remember one of my friends telling this other person that Michael was adopted, and this person, knowing both her and me, didn't believe it!

There are two other players in the story. Rhoda lived with her parents, brother and sister in a neighborhood just a few miles from where we lived. She was a student at one of the academic high schools- artistic, studious, the baby of her family- a good girl. Stuart, her boyfriend, rode a

motorcycle and wasn't particularly academic. Rhoda was expected to go to college and have a full life. They didn't approve of Stuart, and when Rhoda became pregnant as a seventeen year old high school junior they must have been mortified. It may have been the sixties, but Rhoda told me it was still not okay for a nice Jewish girl to walk around pregnant. Stuart was not welcome in their home anymore, and Rhoda was sent to a home for unwed mothers in another state. I always knew I was born in that state but never knew why. After she gave up her baby Rhoda went to college and moved out west, and lived happily ever after. Except not really. She never married and never had other children.

So back to the part where I called Rhoda. I can picture myself now- sitting in my den. My stomach had butterflies. I was talking to the woman who carried me for nine months, whose blood literally runs through my veins, and whom I had never met. In that first conversation she told me she hadn't heard a word about her baby in thirty two years. She didn't even know if I was alive. She thought that maybe when I was a teenager she might have heard from me, but when that time came and went she figured that she probably would never hear. She told me she had named me Jordan, and she told me about her life and her family. My wife thinks I did such a mitzvah for her- as a woman to not know what happened to her child must have ached in her heart every day, and to find out that I was fine and wanted to know her must have been such a tremendous relief. We talked again and became email buddies, exchanging news of our lives, and other details. Rhoda's parents were still living near her old neighborhood, and she told me she and her sister were planning a summer visit, and asked if we would like to get together. They came to our house that summer, and met my wife and my kids for the first time, and me for the second. Rhoda hit it off beautifully with both kids, but particularly my daughter, who was a real girly-girl at four. Her parents still didn't want to meet me. I wasn't hurt, but I think she was. Their loss, I suppose.

I also met Stuart. I called him, told him who I was, and he said he wasn't surprised to hear from me. We met at Starbucks, and he said he would be happy to tell me whatever I wanted to know, and to be whatever I wanted him to be in our lives. We invited him and his wife over for dinner, and they came laden with gifts for our kids. His wife, Sharon, was the real mensch in this saga. Here I was, the child her husband had with a previous girlfriend, who was put up for adoption, but she was as warm and kind as one could imagine. I think when they each met us, and saw that we didn't want anything from them, they all were just happy to be in our lives. Later they invited us to their home to meet their boys, and the various wives and grandchildren.

Rhoda came back to visit a number of times. Her dad died, and I never met him, but after that her mom warmed up a bit and was willing to meet me. I met her a couple of times, and then she moved out west, and has since died. Before she moved she offered me a bag of Jewish books, knowing that these were something I would appreciate. Rhoda and I speak on the phone occasionally, email more frequently, and she sends my kids birthday and Hanukkah presents every time. She came to stay with us for a few days two summers ago, and came last spring for my daughter's bat mitzvah. It's kind of like having this close cousin or family friend, who isn't like a parent or grandparent, but nonetheless is someone else out there who cares about you and loves you. I guess she doesn't want to impose too much, so I think she gives things to my kids, rather than me, which is fine.

When I told my parents that I had found my biological parents my mom cried, and my dad said I could do whatever I felt I needed. I told them that I was 32 years old, and just wanted to find out for my kids' sake, that they knew I wasn't looking for my "real" family or anything like that. When they found out that Rhoda and Stuart were really nice, kind, good people they were probably relieved.

I said earlier that I was the only person in my family who was very religious. I asked Rhoda about that, and found out that no one in her family was anywhere even as religious, or involved in Judaism as anyone in my family. So much for that theory. Many of the people in my family have the same first names as people in Rhoda's and Stuart's families. Rhoda, Stuart, and my parents are all under 5 feet 2.

I still email with Rhoda regularly. She probably thinks about us more than we think about her. But somewhere in my subconscious, finding her helped to make me a more whole person. I had pretty much everything I needed- supportive parents, loving grandparents, a wonderful wife, great kids, a good education, stable family, nice house, good friends, and now I also had answers to everyone's first question- where did I come from?