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# Sh'ma

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

*Celebrating 25 years of diversity and dialogue*

## In this issue

**The Passover Seder encodes within its structure, its rhetoric, and its symbols, a variety of seemingly endless messages of hope, freedom, love and identity. In this issue, rubrics of the Seder are used to explore the complex sentiments surrounding adoption.**

## Adoption haggadah **Michele Kriegman-Chin**

*I have drawn on a combination of traditional Jewish sources and my own insight into the psychology of an adoptee's reunion to retell the story of Passover as an account of an adoptee who tries to reconcile the two halves of his heritage by returning to the domain of his birth and childhood. There he confronts both his adoptive kin, the Egyptians, and his biological kin, the Hebrews. But Moses can also serve as an archetype for anyone who is trying to synthesize the two (or more) selves of a variegated background. Thus "Egyptians" and "Hebrews" will have different meanings for different celebrants.*

*From this telling (and from their hearts) adoptive parents should know that a reunion with birthparents does not threaten adoptive parent-child bonds. Most adoptees find, as did Moses, that a reunion with biological relatives also brings them closer to their adoptive parent. In fact, in this Adoption Haggadah, the midrashim about Moses' adoptive mother and her lifelong relationship with Moses are as important as the story of Moses itself.*

*What follows are excerpts from this Adoption Haggadah, a text created to face the anguish and blessings of adoption.*

### The Maggid/The Adoption Story

Long, long ago there lived a birthmother named Yocheved who was a Hebrew slave in Egypt. The Hebrew name for Egypt, *mitzrayim*, means narrow or confining place. She could not keep her infant son

because the Pharaoh had just issued an edict ordering the death of all baby boys born to Hebrew women. Desperate, she set him adrift in the River Nile hoping someone kind would claim him.

There he lost the mother who had carried him in her womb for nine months and nursed him at her breast for three months. Not only did he lose his birthmother, he lost his biological family, his people, his culture and his holidays. But he did not lose his life.

Instead, he was saved by the daughter of Pharaoh and she became his adoptive mother. Perhaps it was wrestling with infertility that gave her the resolve to save the baby in the bulrushes even when it meant flouting her father's decree of death. Indeed, there is no record of her ever giving birth to biological children.

Like most adoptive mothers, she erased the found child's birthname and gave him a new one, Moses. She chose it because it meant "to draw out" as in her drawing him out of the waters of the Nile.

The men of the Torah, in turn, erased her royal Egyptian name and the men of the Talmud gave her a new Hebrew one,

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Batyah. Batyah meant "daughter of God" because God adopted her in return for her adopting Moses.

Moses and Batyah were very happy in their new life together, with their new names. Until one day Moses the adoptee witnessed strife between one of his biological Hebrew kin and one of his adoptive Egyptian kin.

Perhaps it was due to the Hebrew woman, enraged that she had been wrongfully forced to relinquish her child and that her grief had been ignored.

Perhaps to the Egyptian woman, who felt her years as the giver of nurturance were being unrewarded.

Perhaps to Moses, who asked a probing question about his own past that the Egyptian answered with a warning silence or a forbidding lie.

Whatever the cause of the strife, Moses smote the Egyptian whom he saw beating the Hebrew. Then he asked no more questions. He did not protest for justice.

He fled.

He fled and then he forgot in a new land called Midian. He befriended a priest named Jethro and married his daughter, Zipporah, and they had a son.

Yet even then there were signs that flight had not brought him peace. Despite his education in the royal court, Moses found himself working as a shepherd. When it came time to name his infant son, Moses chose the name Gershom because it meant "a stranger in a strange land".

One day while tending his flock, Moses saw a burning bush. God addressed Moses: "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Thus Moses, the adoptee, heard spoken for the first time the names of his Hebrew ancestors. (Obviously, God opposes sealed records.)

What brought Moses this burning vision?

Perhaps it was becoming a father and realizing the importance of genealogical connection.

Perhaps it was acclimating himself to Midianite culture and, in the process, gaining a sense of the holiness of his own heritage.

Only after persuasion and promises was God able to draw Moses on his quest. Moses, although identifying himself as a Hebrew, felt alienated from the Hebrew people and traditions. He was not sure other Hebrews would accept him. Even when it came to addressing the Egyptian court of his childhood, Moses used the formality of a stranger. Nowhere--among Midianites, among Hebrews, among Egyptians--was Moses at ease. He felt cut off from the human condition and, as the rabbis of the

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Talmud tell, he stuttered whenever he spoke to his fellow man. And yet...

And yet God gave him wonders: the ability to make water turn to blood; the ability to turn his staff into a serpent;

When words failed him, God let his biological brother Aaron be his mouthpiece;

When God hardened Pharaoh's heart, his adoptive mother Batyah's remained open; and she chose to cross the Red Sea with her son.

And most wondrous of all, God transformed Moses' pain to a visionary passion.

### The Four Adoptees

(Read the following paragraphs aloud, by turns)

Blessed be God whose writer will speak of four different characters of adoptees: The Inquisitive Adoptee; The Threatened Adoptee; The Biological Child; The Deceived Adoptee.

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1. The Inquisitive Adoptee asks: "What is the meaning of the rules, laws and customs which the Eternal our God has commanded us?"

You shall explain to him all the laws of Passover, to the very last detail of the Search for Afikomen. And you shall refer to his experience of being lost and then saved from the dark waters of the Nile to explain welcoming the stranger, the widow, and the orphan to this table because they have also known those dark waters.

2. The hostile, Threatened Adoptee asks: "What is the meaning of this seder to *you*? This adoptee may even act to prevent other adoptees from carrying out their own Searches for origins and may lobby to maintain sealed records.

To this adoptee, you can say: "Because even Moses fled to Midian for years, I can accept your state of denial, but you have no right to prevent our temporary return to Egypt and reunion with the Hebrews."

3. The non-adopted child asks: "What is this?" This child takes genealogical knowledge and contact with biological kin so for granted that you must explain the "need to know".

4. As for the Adoptee Who Has Not Been Told they are adopted, you must assure them that their instincts are correct, their suspicions are not crazy, and you must tell their parents not only the story of Moses, but also the story of his adoptive mother, Batyah.

### The Ten Plagues That Befall Adopters

1. *Dam*/blood: Waiting for the results of blood and other tests. Waiting for a biological child. Then waiting again for an adoptable child.

2. *Ts'fardei-a*/frogs: Dealing with the sad, angry behavior of a child who has been hopped from foster home to foster home.

3. *Kinim*/lice: Jealousy like irritating lice. Jealousy of others' fertility. Jealousy of any attention paid to a birthparent.

4. *Arov*/untamed beasts: Invasion by untamed experts. Supercilious, duplicitous, invasive and evasive but omnipotent, unfortunately.

5. *Dever*/disease: Infertility that can feel like a disease on one's femininity or masculinity.

6. *Sh'hin*/boils: Fear that bursts forth like boils. Fear of never becoming a parent. Then fear of losing their child to a birthmother after reunion.

7. *Barad*/hail: Something as unlikely as hail falling in Egypt: the adoption agency myth that "love is enough", and that their children will never have a natural curiosity about their own origins.

8. *Arbeh*/locusts: Fees that eat up green like locusts.

9. *Hoshekh*/darkness: the darkness of secrecy and deceit that permeates the sealed records process and touches all triad members.

10. *Makat B'khorot*: Death of a real or fantasized biological child.

### Hallel, Psalm 113

"...God raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the dunghill; to assign him a seat among princes, even with the princes of his people.

God sets up the barren woman to dwell in the house as a joyful mother of children; Hallelujah!" □

## On the rainbow as a sign of mercy

Elen Geist

When we read of God's rainbow appearing in the sky after the flood, it's easy to think as I always did, that it was given to *us*, to remind us of *our* covenant with God. But in reading the words of the Torah in the story of Noah more closely, I found it strange and even mysterious that this is not what the text says. The bow, it says, will be seen in the sky *to remind God* of the covenant "that I", meaning *God*, "will remember *my* covenant...when I will look upon it". The text even repeats, "that I may remember the everlasting covenant which I have established between me and thee".

Now why should God need a reminder? Isn't God perfect? Would God forget a promise? Become irrationally angry at the evil in the world and lose it? Is God a partner in a dysfunctional relationship? Isn't it we who are controlled by our emotions: anger, fury, aggression, and need *our* part of the covenant to become more God-like? Or could it be, that as in any relationship, any covenant, we not only need God, but God needs us?

### A Sign At My Father's Funeral

I was thinking about the meaning of this line in Noah because of a recent conversation I had with my cousin about my father's funeral several years ago. As my cousin and his brother drove away from the funeral, during which it had rained, they saw an enormous and perfect rainbow in the sky. "Your father was a chemical

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