

FILLING THE VOID: Creating Jewish Families Through Adoption

By Bayla Sheva Brenner

A rising number of frum couples are taking their determination to enter Jewish parenthood to the next level by adopting a child

Baby boomers and the subsequent generations have come face-to-face with the sad irony of infertility and childlessness. American Jews, on an individual and communal level, are suffering the consequences of this baby bust. According to the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01, a majority of Jewish women between ages twenty-five and thirty-four have not had a child. The economic advancement, accessible birth control and rising educational opportunities of the post-World War II era have sent Jewish fertility plummeting.

As the secular world continues to embrace the trend of marrying—and thereby parenting—later, the Orthodox Jewish community struggles to hold tight to its time-honored practice of marrying young, with the goal of building a family the pressing priority. Yet, a growing number of Orthodox women are finding themselves still single well into their thirties and forties and facing

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the risk of falling out of the fertility loop.

When they finally do marry, some of them are forced, along with their spouses, to invest a great deal of hope, time and money into grueling fertility treatments, only to find themselves coming up empty-handed.

More and more of these couples are taking their determination to enter Jewish parenthood to the next level by adopting a child. The latest NJPS notes that just over 5 percent of American Jewish households have children who are adopted—a 2 percent increase since the 1990 survey. Anecdotal evidence indicates a rise in the observant community as well.

“Adoption is definitely more sought after and accepted in the *frum* community [now],” says Brany Rosen, founder and director of A T.I.M.E., A Torah Infertility Medium of Exchange, an international non-profit organization devoted to the support and education of Jewish infertile couples and their families. “It took years of workshops and speeches and very happy adoptive fami-

lies to help couples consider adoption as a real option.” A T.I.M.E. provides an adoption-advice service for interested families.

Reaching Beyond Childlessness

Although adoption offers couples the chance to create a family, the pursuit is not without its challenges. “When we decided to adopt, I spoke to other women already involved in the process,” says Susan Marcus,* who married for the first time at forty and spent years trying to conceive through fertility treatments. “One woman told me if I thought that the infertility procedures were hard, the adoption process is worse.”

Undeterred, Susan and her husband, who live in an Orthodox community in Manhattan, continued to explore adoption. Because they were considered an “older couple,” they figured independent adoption was the best route. Aside from adoption agencies’ high fees (ranging from \$5,000 to as high as \$40,000), they often give preference to younger couples. “I felt that dealing

*Name has been changed.

directly with the birth mother offered us a greater chance of being selected,” says Susan. The Marcuses placed ads in various papers, many of them college publications, hoping a young girl facing an unwanted pregnancy would respond. Within two weeks they received a call from a girl in the Midwest—the first of many encounters with raised hopes and crushing disappointments. “There were many times we were very close,” says Susan. “We paid for all the birth mother’s medical and living expenses throughout her pregnancy. My husband and I were already choosing possible names. Two weeks before the due date, I called the birth mother to see how things were progressing; the phone had been disconnected.”

In 1996, after a trying three-year period of birth mothers changing their minds, miscarrying or disappearing, the Marcuses’ efforts finally paid off. “Yossi came to us through a friend of my sister’s, who had adopted four children of her own,” says Susan. Once again, the couple paid for the birth mother’s medical and living expenses, as well as her lawyer fees. Once the baby was born, the Marcuses flew to Texas to finalize the adoption and bring the baby home. “We walked into the hospital room, and my heart dropped,” says Susan. “I saw this young girl playing with the baby. I was terrified that she would change her mind.” As if reading Susan’s mind, the girl turned to her and said, “I want to do what’s best for my son. Now that I see you, I know this is right.”

Upon their return home, the Marcuses received a message from a birth mother with whom they had kept in contact even though they were proceeding with Yossi’s birth mother. “Since there were so many others that fell through, we had decided to keep in touch with both [mothers],” says Susan. They returned the call and found out that the woman would be delivering twins and wanted the babies to stay together. “I already knew that there were no guarantees in all this,” says Susan. “And we didn’t want Yossi to remain an only child. So we proceeded.”

That Pesach, the Marcuses took their three sons, Daniel, Yaakov and Yehoshua, to the local mikvah for their ritual conversion. “There were many ups and downs, and oceans of tears,” says Susan. “But, in the end, it brought a wonderful outcome.” All three children, currently in fourth grade, attend a local day school.

Beginning the Search

Once a couple decides to adopt, there are a number of choices to make and legal steps to address. There are two basic types of adoption—domestic and inter-country. Additionally, the methods used to conduct the search for a child vary; adoptive parents can choose to find children through a public or private agency or search independently by getting the word out via advertisements and inquiries.

Each option comes with a price tag. Generally, adoption involves the use of either an attorney or an agency. Licensed agencies charge fees ranging from \$5,000 to \$40,000, which include the cost of birth parent counseling, birth expenses, post-placement supervision until the adoption is finalized and a portion of agency costs for overhead and operating expenses. Independent adoptions handled by an attorney generally result in similar costs, which include medical expenses for the birth mother as well as separate legal fees for representing adoptive and birth parents and fees for advertising. Fees for inter-country adoption range from \$7,000 to \$25,000, including agency fees, immigration processing and court expenses. There may be additional costs for travel and in-country stays to process the adoption abroad as well as the cost of the child’s medical care and treatment, translation fees and a fee for a foreign attorney.

Regardless of whether parents choose to pursue domestic or foreign adoption, the laws of every state require prospective adoptive parents to participate in a home study, which entails filling out comprehensive forms as well as visits by a social worker to the adoptive

parents’ home. A home study can take anywhere from three to six months.

A Tale of Two Views

At the start of the adoption process, a Jewish couple also needs to determine whether to adopt a Jewish or non-Jewish child. In numerous places in the Talmud, *Chazal* praise an individual who raises another person’s Jewish child as his own. In today’s world, since many Jewish children given up for adoption end up being placed in Gentile homes, Jewish couples adopting these children provide them with the precious opportunity to grow up in a Jewish home and to experience Jewish life.

Some rabbis assert that adopting a Jewish child is problematic because of the *yichut* (lineage) of the child and therefore maintain that it is preferable to adopt a non-Jewish child. If a Jewish woman does not receive a proper Jewish divorce (*get*), any subsequent union would be considered adulterous. Consequently, a child born from such a union has the status of *mamzer* (an illegitimate child), affecting his future entry into a Jewish marriage. In previous years, rabbis were also concerned that an adopted child may marry his sibling somewhere down the line. However now that the adoption culture has moved from a clandestine process to a significantly more open one, rabbis are not as concerned about this happening.

A non-Jewish adopted child undergoes conversion at the time of adoption, allowing him to marry any individual permitted to wed a convert. According to Rav Moshe Feinstein *z”l*, the child must be told of the conversion by the time he or she reaches Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Because the conversion took place without the child’s consent, at this point of maturity, he is given the option to reject it. Should the child do so, he would be rendered a non-Jew.

Choosing Foreign Adoption

Because of the stiff competition in the United States for healthy babies, many adoptive couples have gone the overseas route. This approach circum-

Expert at Connecting Hearts

“An alarming percentage of Jewish special needs babies have gone to non-Jewish homes,” says Rabbi Dr. Eliezer Goldstock, director of Heart to Heart: American Jewish Society for Distinguished Children. “The parents were desperate.”

Established in 1990, Heart to Heart, which places roughly twenty Jewish special needs children with Jewish families each year, provides support to Jewish parents who have a child with disabilities. Located in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, the organization, which operates a twenty-four-hour hotline, encourages couples who have given birth to babies with special needs to keep their children. When that fails, it locates a suitable home for the child. Rabbi Goldstock, who has placed some 300 children over the past decade, divides his time between finding appropriate homes and fundraising for the organization.

A Vietnam veteran who holds a PhD in neurophysiology, Rabbi Goldstock developed an interest in children with special needs as a young adult. At twenty-one, he worked in a facility in California for mentally and physically handicapped children. At one point during his first two weeks as the facility’s assistant administrator, he visited the swimming pool area. Although aware that such facilities were known at the time to be ill-equipped to service this vulnerable population, Rabbi Goldstock was shocked to see fifty-three children in the pool with only one lifeguard on duty. He promptly asked that everyone be evacuated from the pool, and noticed something floating near the bottom. He immediately jumped in and fished out a six-year-old girl with Down syndrome. She died in his arms. That was in 1964, and the impact of that moment remains with him.

In 1990, Rabbi Goldstock’s wife, Chana, gave birth to a girl with Down syndrome. “Doctors, as well as others, told us to give up the child and get on with our lives,” says Rabbi Goldstock. “Having worked with Down syndrome children, I saw they could accomplish and succeed. From that point on we decided to find the best there was for her education.” The Goldstocks moved to New York to avail themselves of such services. In November of that year, they established Heart to Heart, and soon made themselves known throughout the Orthodox community as the address for arranging placements of babies and children with special needs. In the early days, Rabbi Goldstock would go to the hospital if he heard of Jewish parents who had just given birth to a special needs baby and were looking to give

the baby up. During his hospital visits, he spoke with social workers, physicians and obstetricians on staff. Now these professionals, as well as the couples, contact him directly.

“When a baby is born, we get a phone call within hours of the birth,” says Rabbi Goldstock. “An insider tip from a family member, neighbor or friend.”

Around the time Heart to Heart had placed about twenty-five babies, a woman contacted Rabbi Goldstock about taking her six-day-old baby with Down syndrome. The Goldstocks, who had five children of their own, decided to care for him until they could find appropriate parents. They gave the baby a *Brit* and a name and got busy trying to find him a home. “It started a revolution in our home,” says Rabbi Goldstock. “We were always telling our children it wasn’t right to give children away. They said: ‘Wait—you can’t give kids away!’” Shortly afterward, the Goldstocks adopted the baby. Subsequently, he developed severe digestive problems, requiring several operations. “We were told he would never talk, walk or eat,” says Rabbi Goldstock. “He is talking, walking and eating [and] doing fine.”

According to Rabbi Goldstock, people are realizing that it is okay to have a child that is different. “There is much more acceptance today,” he says. “I’ve accommodated couples who already have children, those who’ve already raised a family and those who adopt more than one. They are not interested in a perfect package but a perfect *neshamah*. Genius and talent ultimately are incidental. Look at the *child*.” Rabbi Goldstock also counsels women with unborn children of imperfect health to carry their pregnancies to term. “Fetal handicap does not justify abortion,” he says. “We are all born with a grave handicap—our mortality.”

Adoptive parents and their adoptive children often call Rabbi Goldstock to express their gratitude for giving them back their lives. Rabbi Goldstock heard of parents putting their child with spina bifida up for adoption. He found a childless couple to adopt her. “Twelve years later, the girl called to tell me that she was on her way to the White House,” says Rabbi Goldstock. “She had written the president about her life, and he asked to meet her. Here is a child, tossed out and saved by a loving family, and doing phenomenally well. Thank God we have been able to see to it that all these children aren’t lost to the Jewish people.”

To contact Heart to Heart: American Jewish Society for Distinguished Children, call 718-221-1551.

vents the possibility of the birth mother changing her mind within thirty days and keeping the baby, which is her right by American law. Before adopting a child from a foreign country, the prospective parents must meet all the United States pre-adoption state requirements, including the home study process. They are also required to have seen the child at least once before or during the adoption process in the country where the child resides.

“Most of my friends adopted babies from Guatemala,” says Karen Braun* of Chicago. “We already tried all we could do medically and decided not to spend any more money without a guarantee of getting a baby.” After completing the home study and the necessary paperwork, in the summer of 2004 the Brauns received photos of their adopted-baby-to-be at three months old. Four months later, they traveled to Guatemala to see the baby, who had been living in a foster home since birth. “When we were told that the foster mother was in the lobby with our baby, I think we both had a kind of adrenaline rush,” says Joshua, Karen’s husband. “We walked quickly down the hotel stairs for what we knew was a momentous meeting. Here I was going to see the little boy ... who was about to become my son.” Now a full-fledged “Ima,” Karen speaks both Hebrew and English to her son, Ze’ev, who just turned two, and teaches him to kiss the *mezuzah* as she carries him from room to room. “We are very fortunate,” she says.

But You Don't Look Jewish

Parents who adopt a baby from overseas or a child of mixed race face the additional concern of communal acceptance. David and Sarah Feinberg* of Long Island, New York, married later in life, yet still very much desired to build a family. In January 1996, they signed up with the Jewish Children’s Adoption Network (JCAN), a Jewish adoption exchange based in Denver (www.users.uswest.net/~jcan/), and hoped for the best. They didn’t expect

to have an offer presented three days later. The JCAN notified the Feinbergs about a healthy biracial baby about to be born to a white birth mother requesting a Jewish adoptive couple. They had a few days to decide. “There was no question,” says Sarah. “We were interested.”

Finding parenting an experience well worth repeating, the couple registered with the state as available foster parents for children likely to be put up for adoption. They fostered a four-month-old Caucasian boy, Eli, whom they soon adopted. Looking to adopt again, they registered with an agency. Within the year, the agency called to inform them of an about-to-be-born biracial baby. “We already had a biracial child,” says Sarah. “So we adopted another.”

The Feinbergs’ biracial children have found their road to acceptance rough at times. “When people say things like: ‘Where is she from? She’s so *exotic*,’ unless I think they’re just being nosy, I give people straight information,” says Sarah. “I say, ‘She’s biracial and was born in New York.’” Some situations were clearly unpleasant. “My husband was once asked in shul: ‘Who’s that *shvartze* girl with you?’ He answered: ‘That’s my daughter. She likes to come to shul with me.’ The man quickly apologized.”

Unfortunately, some children have picked up this intolerance. “Kindergarten seems to be a grade when children begin to notice differences,” says Sarah. “Shoshana, who had just turned six, came home crying: ‘All the kids say I’m dirty,’ and, Eli, her older white brother, said he doesn’t like black people. I asked him where he got that [idea] from and told him that our family is made up of all colors. He said; ‘I don’t mean my sisters.’ I told him that black people are like everybody else; some you’ll like and some you won’t. Some will be part of your family and some won’t.” As for the “dirty” comment, Sarah gently instructed her daughter to tell her classmates that Hashem made her with darker skin. “I

told her to tell them: ‘I’m biracial. My parents adopted me, and now I’m Jewish, and I love the Torah just as much as you do.’ Most children aren’t saying these things to be mean. They’re curious and simply want an explanation. We need to come back with an answer that makes them think.”

Other “different-looking” adopted children integrate fairly painlessly into

While healthy adoptable infants are hard to come by in the United States, there is a consistent pool of special needs Jewish children of all ages and backgrounds anxiously waiting to find Jewish homes.

the Jewish community. Aryeh and Ephraim Lamm, two South Korean-born boys, attended Jewish day school in New Jersey, where they were rarely the targets of negative comments. “Ninety-nine percent of the time, they were completely accepted,” says Cheryl, their adoptive mother. “The kids who make derogatory comments are most likely the ones who would make fun of someone with glasses or [someone who] is overweight.” Aryeh is currently reveling in his year of learning in Israel, and Ephraim enjoys his studies and valued friendships at his Hebrew high school. “I think they’ve both been very blessed,” says Cheryl.

Providing a Home for the Special Needs Child

It is estimated that there are between seventy-five and one hundred couples vying for every healthy adoptable baby born in the United States. “I often receive calls from couples wanting a baby ASAP,” says Alter Katz, who, along with his wife, Yetty, directs the adoption-advice arm of A.T.I.M.E. “It just doesn’t work that way. Sometimes

individuals who hear of a baby will call our office. By the time I try to contact the couple I have in mind, the baby has been spoken for,” says Alter, who lives in New York.

While healthy adoptable infants are hard to come by in the United States, there is a consistent

had to contact the social worker handling the case by 10:00 that night. It was 9:50 p.m. They made the call, and not long afterward welcomed Elisheva into their home.

A number of national Jewish organizations caught wind of the

Denver couple that had adopted a Jewish child at risk of having special needs and asked if they would like “another one.” “We also received calls from Jewish families [who were] surprised to hear we had adopted a Jewish child when everyone has been telling them there weren’t any,” says Steve. “I thought to myself, if there are families interested in adopting these Jewish children who need homes, someone’s got to put them together.” That’s when the Krauszes founded the

JCAN.

Sixteen years and over 1,500 placements later, the JCAN is still open for business—the business of *chesed*, compassion and creating Jewish homes. In its first year, the organization, which places Jewish children with developmental delays, moderate to severe physical disabilities, a family history of mental or emotional illness as well as children exposed to drugs or alcohol in utero, had close to one hundred children who needed placing. Subsequently, the number grew to two hundred, averaging eighty to two hundred during the following years. “We hear from Jewish family service agencies, private

agencies, public agencies, rabbis, attorneys, family members, social workers in hospitals, anyone who hears about a child,” says Steve who runs a mail-order catalog business with his wife. The Krauszes work three to four hours a day for the JCAN, matching children with potential adoptive parents, helping them through the paperwork and other technicalities, always gratified to hear of the happy Jewish homes they had the *zechut* (merit) to help build. “We get babies in all kinds of situations. An adoption agency charging \$30,000 to place a baby has an obvious financial incentive to hide potential problems. We have no such incentive,” says Steve, whose organization provides services free of charge.

While the last decade has seen a rise in Jewish adoption, Steve notes that the number of adoptable Jewish special needs children has actually decreased over the years due to the growth of Jewish schools and organizations that cater to these children. “The acceptance and attitude in the community has improved, and that has helped,” says Steve. Last year, the Krausz family, which includes three biological children and three adopted children, celebrated the bar mitzvah of Raphael (Rafi), one of their adopted children who has Down syndrome. “Rafi was looking forward to ‘being a man,’” reports Steve.

The Krauszes regularly consult



Steve Krausz, pictured here with his daughter, Gavriella. Steve and his wife, Vicki, are the founders of the Jewish Children’s Adoption Network, which seeks to match children with adoptive parents.

pool of Jewish children with special needs of all ages and backgrounds anxiously waiting to find Jewish homes. Twenty-four years ago, when Vicki Krausz of Denver was in the midst of a very difficult labor with her second child, she turned to her husband, Steve, and jokingly said, “We’re going to *adopt* our next child.” Ironically, that is what the Krauszes ultimately did. After suffering numerous miscarriages, Vicki decided to return to college, where she studied radio and communications. At one point, she hosted a show on adoption and needed to attend a local adoption support group for research purposes. Her husband came along with her. While there, they shared their personal story with the group. A week later, the Krauszes received a call from one of the support group participants informing them of a Jewish child born to a mentally incompetent mother and in need of a home. Would they be interested? the caller wanted to know. If so, they



Five of the six Krausz kids at Rafi’s Bar Mitzvah: Elisheva, Gavriella, Rafi, Dora and Nili. Photo: Ed Bernstein Studios



"Rafi [pictured here at his Bar Mitzvah] was looking forward to 'being a man,'" says his father. Photo: Ed Bernstein Studios

with *rabbanim*. When faced with the dilemma of placing children in less-than-Orthodox homes, they received a *pesak halachah* (rabbinic ruling) to place

the children in as observant a home as they could find. "We make a point of giving [the adoptive parents] the book *To Raise a Jewish Child* as a gift," says Steve. "And then we pray!"

Hundreds of thankful couples will attest to the Krausz's knack for matching children with appropriate parents. After the birth of their son, Avrami, Joseph and Miriam Wachtel* of Los Angeles, faced several years of secondary infertility. In 1991, the Wachtels heard about the JCAN and decided to sign up, knowing that the majority of its children have or are at risk of having special needs. "We wanted to give a child a home," says Miriam. "We figured we could handle [a child with] mild problems. There are no guarantees when one has a biological child either." Within two weeks, they received a call from the Krausz's concerning a baby about to be born in their area to an unmarried Jewish woman who was emotionally ill and

incapable of raising the child. Avrami, who was six at the time, was thrilled when his parents brought the baby girl home. "One Shabbat, while I was changing the baby's diaper, he said, 'You've made us a big family,'" says Miriam.

The Wachtels adopted another baby girl through a private agency, and subsequently the Krausz's called them about a three-year-old boy with ADHD-like tendencies whose father went to work one day, had a heart attack and never came home. His mother, who had always found the child to be a handful, felt overwhelmed by the prospect of raising him alone and opted to give him up.

"He was a very angry boy," says Miriam. "And being so young, he couldn't talk these things out. In time, he bonded with us in a big way. When our daughter got sick and cried bitterly in the double stroller, he whipped out his pacifier, which meant the world to

Finding Homes for Special Babies – Grassroots Style

R' Micha and Siggy Berger and mishpachah (Rafi, Yoni, Gavi, Aishey, Eli, Shifra, Zack, Izzy and Noa) would like to introduce the newest Berger, Yehoshua Asher (Shuby, age six). Adoption finalized on December 21, 2004.

Posted by Siggy Berger on OnlySimchas.com: (<http://www.onlysimchas.com/galleries/index.cfm?fuseaction=viewsimcha&simchaid=31173&simchatypeid=1>).

Rabbi Micha and Siggy Berger of Passaic, New Jersey, have been placing Jewish special needs children in adoptive homes for close to two decades. It started with the Bergers' dedication to taking in foster children. "My husband and I were both raised in families that took in foster children," says Siggy. "When we got married, we decided that we wanted to do the same, so we got started right away." In addition to their seven biological children, they adopted three sons. When people in the community heard about the Bergers' foster and adopted children, they started calling for advice about the process. "We met with people, and it evolved from there."

The Bergers, who deal exclusively with children who have special needs, work closely with Rabbi Eliezer Goldstock, director of Heart to Heart: American Jewish Society for Distinguished Children. Thus far, the Bergers have placed hundreds of special needs children. "When we find out there is a child [up for adoption], we network [and] call all around until we are able to find a placement," says Siggy. "We call individuals who might know someone who wants to adopt. Usually someone who takes [in] a special needs child either knows someone else

who would take [such a child] or [is] open to taking in another one [himself]."

The Bergers usually pick the babies up directly from the hospital. The babies come from locations throughout the New York area and sometimes from farther away. They recently received a baby from Canada. "We are able to find homes for [these babies] very quickly through networking," says Siggy. "The Jewish community is amazing [in] how it works together. There is a lot of support."

The Bergers' oldest adopted child is biracial and has a blood disorder, the second has Asperger's syndrome and the third has Down syndrome and diabetes. All three have been with the family since they were infants. "I don't understand how anybody can hear about a Jewish child who needs a home and not say 'I'll take him. Send him my way,'" says Siggy.

The Bergers currently receive six to eight referrals per year, much fewer than in the past. "Parents are trying to keep their own kids," she says. "It's not such a *shanda* [embarrassment] to take them home now."

To contact the Bergers, call 973-473-8113.

Tehilla's Story

I was first told I was adopted when I was about two years old. My parents also informed me that they would soon be bringing home an adopted little sister for me. They said I remained absolutely silent for the next twenty-four hours. The following evening, they found me jumping around the house excited about the prospect that my little sister would be coming home.

My adoptive parents' lawyer knew my birth mother's obstetrician. My birth mother was sixteen years old when she gave birth to me. She was pleased that I was going to an Orthodox Jewish family because Orthodox Jews were known to take care of their families, no matter what. She knew that family comes first in our community. My parents paid for her medical care while waiting for me to arrive.

I'm told that when my grandfather heard that my parents were adopting me, he voiced his concern about how he was going to love a child that wasn't a blood relative. Shortly after my parents brought me home, he came to see me. His reaction? "How on earth did I ever think I would not love this child?" I guess I won his heart.

When I was in kindergarten there was another child constantly giving me a hard time about my being adopted. One day, I turned around and said, "You know what? My mother got to choose me out of millions of kids; your mother was stuck with you!" It was obvious I was very proud of that fact. The girl stopped teasing me after that.

My parents are the only parents I know. They *are* my parents, despite the fact that someone else gave birth to me. I recognize that there are genetic differences, but that's all. I never felt any different from any other Orthodox Jewish child growing up in America. Much of who I am and where I am in my life is because of my adoptive parents. I sat shivah when my father died. Although adoptive children aren't required to do so, I chose to.

I probably asked questions about my birth mother all along, but it wasn't until I turned sixteen that I wanted to know everything about my birth parents. My birth mother is Irish, and my birthfather is Greek. My birth father has blonde hair and blue eyes and was eighteen when I was born. To this day he probably doesn't know that he has a daughter.

At forty-one, I'm still curious about my biological parents, but they've no doubt moved on, and I don't want to intrude on their lives at this point. I'm glad my biological mother made the right choice. I think that if she, an Irish Catholic girl, had raised a child out of wedlock, it would have been a disaster. Her pregnancy, I'm sure, was horrifying to her family. I'd like to meet her and thank her for making the decision she made, rather than choosing to end the pregnancy. I have my life and am very happy where I am. My children are proud that their Mommy is proud to have been adopted.

him, and gave it to her. I saw his generous spirit, and it removed every doubt about who he was."

"I feel as deeply connected to my adopted children as I do to my biological one," says Miriam. Her adopted son, now fourteen, talks about wanting to meet his biological mother. The Wachtels told him that he could meet her once he turns eighteen. "I think it would be too unsettling right now," says Miriam. "I send his birth mother photos around the time of his birthday each year. I usually ask him if he wants to include something. He tells me, 'Say hi for me,' so I do.

"Each child has brought our home such joy and excitement," says Miriam. "We recently heard of three Jewish children below the age of four whose parents were deemed incompetent, and they had to be placed in foster care. [My] kids immediately responded with 'Yeah! Let's do it!'"

Everyone Needs a Family

There seems to be no sense of belonging stronger and more yearned for than the one



Abby, one of the twins, lights Chanukah candles with her adoptive parents, Jim and Yael Putney. The Putneys, who both have grown children from previous marriages, adopted four children with special needs because they wanted to offer them a loving home.

generated within a wholesome, supportive home. As much as children without homes need parents to raise them, adoptive parents ache for the opportunity to fill their lives with the love, care and intimate joining together of a family unit.

Jim and Yael Putney of South Florida, who both have grown children from previous marriages, adopted four children with special

Abby (in wheelchair), who has mild cerebral palsy, and Naomi Sarah, who has Prader-Willi syndrome, wait for the school bus.



needs simply because they wanted to offer them an environment of love. They decided that if a Jewish child needs a home, their door is open. "If Jewish couples don't adopt [Jewish children], they go to Gentile homes," says Yael, the director of software documentation for a local software company.

"There aren't many of us in the frum world adopting children with special needs. My youngest was from an observant family, and the family would not have been comfortable had she been placed [in a non-observant family]. I would encourage others to do this."

According to the Putneys, their children's birth parents are all professionals with the financial means to take care of them, but chose not to. "We try not to be judgmental," says Yael. "I've never walked in their shoes; I don't know all the factors in their lives."

The Putneys placed their name on the JCAN list, and six months later were told of a baby born in their area who had Prader-Willi syndrome, a chromosomal disorder that causes metabolic difficulties. (The center of the brain that controls appetite malfunctions, causing the child to experience insatiable hunger.) Naomi Sarah, now four, receives regular physical, occupational and speech therapy and takes growth hormones, which help strengthen the weakened muscles that accompany her

condition. "Early intervention has been a tremendous help," says Yael. When Naomi Sarah was sixteen months old, the Putneys adopted a set of premature twins whose skull bones fused too early, impeding their brain development. Shortly after the Putneys adopted them, they underwent surgery, which corrected the problem. One of the twins was also born with cerebral palsy. They subsequently adopted another baby with Prader-Willi syndrome in March 2005 through Rabbi Micha and Siggie Berger, adoption coordinators for babies with special needs. The Bergers, from Passaic, New Jersey, as well as Rabbi Dr. Eliezer Goldstock of Heart to Heart: American Jewish Society for Distinguished Children, in Brooklyn, have become known throughout the Orthodox community as addresses for arranging placements of babies and children with special needs. [See sidebars.]

The families who adopt children with special needs are not left to fend for themselves financially or emotionally. The Putney children's medical needs are covered under Medicaid, and the neighborhood kids stop by every day to play with the children. (In most cases, children with special needs are eligible for Medicaid and monthly state subsidies.) Yael reports that rather than put a strain on their marriage, their children's various challenges have served to bolster it. "We enjoy pulling together and doing what's necessary to give them what they need," she says. "The children are very close and worry about one

another. They take care of each other."

Recently, the couple received a call about taking another baby with Prader-Willi syndrome. They declined, thinking it would be unfair to the other children, but they were able to find another Orthodox family to take the child in.

"There aren't many of us



Yael Putney and her girls—Abby, Becca, Ahuva Dina and Naomi Sarah—shortly after Ahuva Dina was welcomed to the Putney home in March 2005. "The children are very close and worry about one another. They take care of each other."

in the frum world adopting children with special needs," says Yael. "My youngest was from an observant family, and the family would not have been comfortable had she been placed [in a non-observant family]. I would encourage others to do this." The Putneys are in the process of starting a group home in South Florida for children with developmental disabilities, as well as a home for boys with autism who cannot be placed in a family setting.

Those who have chosen to build their families through adoption concur that the laborious process of adoption—piles of paperwork, strangers inspecting one's home, fielding personal questions, getting fingerprinted, having one's background checked—is completely worthwhile. "While going through our first adoption, I said I wasn't going to do *this* again," says Miriam. "But as soon as the child entered our lives, we were more than ready to adopt another [one]. I said, 'Okay, fingerprint me!'" **JA**