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Building Racial Identity: The Challenge of Religion

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The oldest son, Gabriel Goldberg, holds his glass in the air with an awkward grace, praying not to be the one to spill wine on the starched white tablecloth...not again, not at this Seder. Though he chants the prayers respectfully, his eyes twinkle. He knows someone will spill something; it's part of the fun. His brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins stand around the table, raising their glasses, repeating the ritual of the holiday as they have since his earliest memory, as they will probably do each year to come he imagines, as long as his parents are alive. He can't hear his own voice separate from the others. Soon there will be a purple puddle in the middle of the table. "Never mind," Mom will say. "No problem," Dad will soothe. This is what it means to be part of his family. Passover is his favorite holiday. Soon he will have three matzoh balls, light as air, floating in his chicken soup.

Gabe, who is eighteen, is Korean. He was adopted at the age of three. He can't imagine being in his family and not being Jewish. The Goldbergs practice their religion around the dinner table. Holidays are mandatory events. But outside the front door, Gabe does not feel like a Jew.

In the synagogue, people stare. He doesn't look Jewish. No other Korean Jews attend services. When he visited a church with a mostly Asian congregation, he didn't feel as if he belonged there, either. He didn't know the rules. He felt like an outsider — though he loved looking like the others. Now that he's a young adult, he thinks maybe he just isn't meant to be a religious sort of person. Holiday traditions are great, but for him they are about being part of his family, not about being spiritually connected. He hates to attend services in the synagogue.

The challenge of religion for transracially-adopted people is having a dual identity in the context of religion. Dual identity means encompassing both the heritage of the adoptive family and the heritage of the birth family. But many religions expect complete allegiance: that is, one is discouraged from belonging to two religions at once.

Logically, anyone who believes there is one true path to God cannot embrace two religions at once and may not experience conflict. For others, a choice is implied between the religion in which one is raised as part of one's adoptive family, the religion of one's birth heritage, the religion society expects one to be part of because of race, and/or the religion one might choose for oneself. Whenever you are forced to chose between one thing and another, the logical consequence is that you will lose the one you did not embrace. If Gabriel Goldberg, for example, began to practice Buddhism along with Judaism, his family might feel he was renouncing Judaism. Since, in their practice, religious traditions are family rituals, this might be seen as renouncing the family as well. Such a potential loss might make religion, in whatever form, too conflict-ridden, pushing him toward the conclusion that "he just isn't meant to be a religious sort of person."

One of the things that makes a family feel connected is worshipping together. No one questions whether children who are born into a family are of the religion of their parents. Should the way one enters a family make a difference? The birthright of adopted children is the right to full membership in the family they grow up within. Being adopted means having a dual identity, the heritage of the birth family and the heritage of the adoptive family. If parents withhold their religion from their children, it is likely to become a barrier between them, a barrier that can make the child feel s(he) holds second-class membership in the family circle. Holding back in an area vested with history and importance is a way of keeping children outside the inner family circle. It does not serve them. We need to entitle adopted children to share all that their parents are. It is a disservice to lock them out of any family traditions. It means they are not full members of the family.

Imagine this:

Gabriel Goldberg hates Passover. From his room, he can hear his brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins at the table, laughing and chanting. He is excused from the ritual because he was not born a Jew. It is one of the worst nights of the year for Gabe. His stomach hurts and he feels cold. Not even the bowl of chicken soup brought by his mother can warm him up.

Some families who adopt transracially identify with a religion but are not devout believers. Such parents frequently wonder if they should raise their child within their faith if it is different from that of the child's birth parents, or if they can allow the child to have a different religion from the other members of the adoptive family. If there are several adopted children, should each one have their own religion? If this were possible, could it be managed by parents of yet a different religion? For true believers, these are not valid questions. For the good of their children, they must teach them to follow the path they believe to be true.

Parents who adopt transracially are often encouraged to worship in a church where people of the child's racial background are in the majority, whether the service meets the adoptive families spiritual traditions or not. The church is seen as an important support base for the child, a place for the child to experience being part of the majority, the goal to keep the child from being deprived of the spiritual community (s)he was born into. In theory, this makes perfect sense. In practice, it may create a double bind. Unless the belief systems are in accord and the only question is finding a location at which to worship, there may be inherent conflict. Different belief systems are not interchangeable. If the religion of the adoptive parents prohibits them from worshipping in a church other than their own, they simply cannot take their child to any other congregation. What if the parents are uncomfortable at a particular church but attend anyway for the sake of the children? Will the children be able to feel comfortable or will family loyalty keep them from participating fully? If they feel comfortable attending services outside their faith, but only as observers, not participants, what kind of model are they creating for the child? Sending children off to church by themselves would probably not work, but sometimes close friends of extended family can take children when parents cannot, in good conscience, attend.

Gabe began to protest going to services as soon as he got old enough to say no. He said, more than anywhere else, he hated being stared at in the synagogue where he had grown up. "It felt worse to experience racial bias in a place where I should have been immune — a spiritual sanctuary ...but not for me," he said.

If the religion of the adoptive parents is not one that usually associated with the child's race, the child may not ever feel fully included by the other members of the congregation; rather, a constant curiosity. Parents need to understand how the child is being received within their own religious environment. Though parents may imagine that their children share their parents' experiences, in a race-conscious society this is extremely unlikely. The child may have difficulty participating because (s)he continually feels set apart, never fully accepted.

One tool available to adoptive parents is a working knowledge of the religion(s) common to people of the child's race. Without attempting to profess membership in an unfamiliar religion, a parent can nonetheless become familiar with the traditions, teachings, and social significance of the religion(s) which society might associate with the child as a matter of race. As with all important life issues, knowledge is power. Education goes a long way toward providing feelings of competency and comfort in approaching difficult issues. It is an advantage to any individual to know more about practices, structures, and the history of things that may come up in one's interactions with others.

As with all complex parenting issues, perhaps the best advice is to strive to understand and value the child's experiences and perceptions. The power of adoption is in honoring differences among family members while celebrating the things which make the family belong together. The solution for Gabe Goldberg and his family is to practice religious traditions together within their home and to respect the different roads each family member might take in approaching the outside community. It's not a perfect solution, but for one family, it works.