



Peoplehood Papers 32

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**Latin American Jewish
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Editors: Shlomi Ravid, Smadar Bar Akiva and Analucia Lopezvoredó

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publications@jpeoplehood.org

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Reflections on the Adoptee's Place in Latino Jewish Peoplehood

David McCarty-Caplan

For Latino adopted Jews, the question of Latin American Jewish peoplehood is fraught with complexity and tension. Our lives began with profound loss. We were separated from our first mothers, disconnected from our cultures of origin, untethered from the heritage of our ancestors. We were given new homes and new families. We were raised within American Jewish communities, with a new culture and religion. And yet we remain Latino. Many of us have had our Jewishness questioned by others, because we were (most likely) not born into Judaism, or don't 'look' Jewish. And yet we remain Jewish. So then, where do Latino adoptees fit in explorations of Latino American Jewish collective identity, when we are part of these two worlds but often do not feel fully grounded or seen in either?

Jewish American communities have a particularly significant connection to adoption. While approximately 2.5% of American families with children have an adopted child, estimates suggest this number is more than 5% among American Jewish families with children¹. Jewish Americans also pursue adoption from other countries at a greater rate than the U.S. overall. Between 2000-2009 it is estimated that 66% of adoptions to Jewish American parents were transnational, compared to 15% of all adoptions in the U.S. at this time². There is also evidence that the percentage of nonwhite children adopted into Jewish families has increased over time, up to approximately 76% of adoptions by the 2010's³. Comparatively, approximately 40% of all adoptions in the U.S. are transracial. Among these adoptions within Jewish families, 17% are estimated to be adoptions of Latino children. These estimates suggest the intersections of adoption, race and

1 Kreider, R. M. (2003). Adopted children and stepchildren, 2000. Census 2000, special reports. Washington, DC: US Department of Commerce.

2 Sartori, J. (2016). Modern families: multifaceted identities in the Jewish adoptive family. *Mishpachah: the Jewish family in tradition and in transition*. Purdue University Press, West Lafayette IN, 197-218.

3 It is important to note that the overwhelming majority of adoptive parents in the U.S. historically have been, and continue to be, white.

communal Jewish identity are particularly salient issues to address within American, and Latino American Jewish communities.

In order to address where Latino adoptees fit in conversations of Latin Jewish peoplehood, let us first consider a few hard truths about adoption. It is my belief that adoption, regardless of context or outcome, should be recognized as a traumatic experience for any child. This is often a challenging concept for adoptive parents or the general public to understand, as the narrative around adoption in the U.S. broadly, and within Judaism specifically, has for generations mostly characterized adoption as a righteous, or benevolent act of charity; a mitzvah that benefits everyone. A nuanced understanding of adoption, however, reveals this narrative as an overly cheerful simplification of an extremely complex situation. While many adoptees have gained loving families and wonderful opportunities that they may not have experienced if not for their adoption, finding a new family also necessitated the loss of another.

The loss of our first families is often ignored or denied, yet is known to be associated with significant struggles through life. For example, adoptees experience disproportionate rates of mental health challenges, attachment and relationship issues, and troubling addictive behaviors. Many of these problems arise from identity development experiences that are uniquely challenging for adoptees due to being separated from our families of origin. For transracial and/or transnational Latinos adopted into Jewish families, these challenges are exacerbated by the fact that we have lost connections to our own racial and cultural identities, and often have been harmed by experiences with racism (both subtle and explicit) or made to feel unwelcome within our own Jewish communities. Many of our white adoptive parents, even when well-intentioned, are ill-prepared to support us through these issues due to lack of lived experience and/or a hesitancy to directly and consistently address racism that is all-to-common among white Jewish communities.

On the other side, many Latino adoptees struggle to find solace or belonging in Latino, or Latino Jewish communities. We commonly feel self-conscious about our capacity with the Spanish language, knowledge of our homelands, or understanding of cultural norms we were not raised with. We are keenly aware of how we are perceived by other Latinos and what language they choose to engage us with. We are profoundly sensitive to how they respond if we disclose our adoptee or Jewish identities. We did not choose to be separated from our families and our homelands, yet we bear the burden of how these disconnections impact how we are received in Latino and Latino Jewish spaces. Many of us ask ourselves: Are we Latino enough? Are we Jewish enough? The answer to these questions often leaves us wanting. The Spanish phrase, '*ni de aqui, ni de alla*' – neither from here, nor from there – captures this feeling beautifully.

It is my deep wish that both Latino and white Jewish communities will consider the experiences of Latino adopted Jews as described briefly above, and recognize a connection to the notion of 'Kol Yisrael Areivim Ze La Ze' Meaning all of Israel are responsible for each other. This reflects the Jewish notion of communal responsibility, and the Jewish value of caring for the wounds of others in our community. There is so much that can be done to help Latino adopted Jews heal our wounds. White Jewish communities could work actively to deconstruct the false notion that equates American Jewishness with whiteness. They could embrace an understanding that inherent in our adoption comes a responsibility to stand by our side as we go through the hard work of exploring our identities and finding ourselves. Even when it is not what you expected. Even when it hurts. Show us that your choice to bring us into Judaism includes a willingness to fight to ensure we find a sense of belonging, affirmation and love in Jewish community. Latino Jewish communities could turn towards us with warmth, and offer gently to teach us of our lost cultures and languages. See us as Latino, without need for qualification. Listen to our stories, and help us find connections to bind us together as a people. Open your arms wide, welcome us home.

It is immensely encouraging that the affirmation of Latino adopted Jews that I seek does exist in pockets of the Jewish organizational landscape. For example, Bend the Arc's Selah fellowship connects and supports Jewish leaders of color in a way that allows for specific examination of the complexities of Jewish adoptee identity. Jewtina y .co is dedicated to exploring the intersections of Latinidad and Jewishness, that has created community that warmly welcomes Latino adopted Jews. Camp Tawonga applies concepts of radical inclusivity and racial justice to provide transformative experiences for Jewish youth, adults and families, including a 'families of color' weekend that offers workshops on adoption issues within Judaism. Jewish Youth for Community Action launched Jews Against Marginalization, an affinity space for Jews of color, Sephardic, and Mizrahi youth that includes Jewish adoptees. And the Jews of Color Initiative, dedicated to supporting initiatives that benefit Jews of Color, has provided funding for research on experiences of Jewish adoptees (among many other projects). These are examples of what ideal Latino Jewish community could look like for Latino adoptees; inclusive, expansive, innovative, inquisitive, loving, and bold. May we all work together to expand on these efforts, and build a Latino Jewish peoplehood that truly exemplifies the spirit of *Kol Yisrael Areivim Ze La Ze* by welcoming all Latino adopted Jews with open arms.

Dr. David McCarty-Caplan was born in Bogota, Colombia but adopted and raised in a Jewish family in the United States. This lived experience has profoundly shaped his

personal and professional interest in the complexities of identity development and social justice. David earned a PhD in Social Work, and is a researcher, educator, author, and consultant who specializes in organizational analysis and evaluation, and support of adoptee and other marginalized and underserved populations.

The Peoplehood Papers provide a platform for Jews to discuss their common agenda and key issues related to their collective identity. The journal appears three times a year, with each issue addressing a specific theme. The editors invite you to share your thoughts on the ideas and discussions in the Papers, as well as all matters pertinent to Jewish Peoplehood: publications@jpeoplehood.org. Past issues can be accessed at www.jpeoplehood.org/library

The Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education (CJPE) is a "one stop" resource center for institutions and individuals seeking to build collective Jewish life, with a focus on Jewish Peoplehood and Israel education. It provides professional and leadership training, content and programmatic development or general Peoplehood conceptual and educational consulting.

Rooted in a rich history of Latin-Jewish heritage, **Jewtina y Co.** stands as a transformative force in nurturing a vibrant and inclusive community. Since our founding in 2019, we've pioneered innovative programming, thought-provoking dialogues, and meaningful connections that empower Latin Jews to embrace their distinct cultural identities. As a trailblazing organization, we provide a platform for individuals to explore the intersections of Latin and Jewish heritage, building bridges between diverse backgrounds.

Founded in 1977 in Jerusalem, **JCC Global** is a network of more than 1,000 Jewish Community Centers (JCCs) serving several million Jews in North America, Israel, Europe, Latin America, Former Soviet Union, Australia, and the Far East. It envisions a world where Jewish communities thrive locally and connect globally in order to foster a sense of belonging among a diverse and intertwined tapestry of people. JCC Global creates a network of interwoven communities that strengthens Jewish Peoplehood by training local leaders to think and connect globally and by cultivating meaningful partnerships around the world.

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