



SHADES OF BELONGING

Exploring Religious
Identity and Sense of
Belonging Among Jewish
Adoptees of Color

Research Summary & Highlights

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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:



Jews of Color Initiative

JEW TINA *y Co.*



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Introduction



In recent years, growing awareness of the breadth of racial diversity within American Jewish communities, and the marginalization and discrimination commonly experienced by Jews of Color (JOCs) in the United States has encouraged increased efforts to better understand and support the needs of JOCs¹. However, while research focused on JOCs is increasing, few studies have specifically examined the experiences of non-white children adopted into white Jewish families. This is problematic because Jewish communities have a particularly significant history of engaging in adoption, and yet little is known about this complex family and community dynamic. Thus, the capacity of Jewish communities to comprehend and respond to the unique needs of transracially adopted Jews remains underdeveloped. This limitation is an important challenge to overcome, if Jewish communities in the U.S. are to achieve the inherent responsibility of affirming and loving a child brought into a family/community, and realize the larger Jewish traditional commitment to pursuing greater social and racial justice.



The Shades of Belonging Study was created to examine this issue, by exploring the experiences of Jewish adoptees of color (JOC adoptees). Through a mixed-methods approach that combined a quantitative survey with qualitative interviews, the study intended to provide holistic and high-quality data that illuminates insights into the intersectional issues of race, religious identity, and adoption within Judaism. This research is rooted in the belief that every voice within the Jewish community deserves to be heard and valued. As such, the Shades of Belonging Study intended to center and uplift the voices and perspectives of JOC adoptees, uncover the nuanced challenges faced by these adoptees, particularly in navigating their multiple identities in predominantly white Jewish spaces, and foster greater dialogue on an understudied, yet important, aspect of Jewish racial identity and community belonging. It is hoped that findings from this study will help develop not only our understanding of the unique experiences of JOC adoptees, but also reveal ways that the larger Jewish community can improve its capacity to support the complex needs of the growing multi-racial, multicultural Jewish population.



Funding Supporters & Research Team

The Shades of Belonging Study began in 2023, with funding support from the Jews of Color Initiative (JOCI) and Jewtina_y_Co. The research was designed and implemented by Dr. David McCarty-Caplan, who is himself a Colombian Adopted Jew and a researcher, consultant, and educator who specializes in racial equity and support of underserved populations. This lived experience as a JOC adoptee is a fundamental aspect of Dr. McCarty-Caplan's identity, and served as inspiration for this research. Furthermore, having the research led by a JOC adoptee facilitated unique access to, and understanding of, the target population of the Shades of Belonging Study.



Significance of Adoption in Judaism



Estimates suggest approximately 5% of American Jewish families with children have an adopted child, compared to 2.5% of American families with children overall². 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 time. 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's. Comparatively, approximately 40% of all adoptions in the U.S. are transracial³. Furthermore, when you consider siblings, cousins, aunts etc. it is likely that there are more than 500,000 American Jews directly impacted by adoption within their own families². Taken together, these estimates suggest that examining the intersections of race, adoption and religious identity are particularly salient and valuable issues to address within American Jewish communities.



Acknowledging Adoption Trauma



“Adoption loss is the only trauma in the world where the victims are expected by the whole of society to be grateful”

Reverend Keith C. Griffith

Adoption is a childhood experience that shapes a child's emotional, psychological, and social development throughout their life. Research consistently shows that while adoption can provide stability and a loving family environment, it often involves significant emotional challenges for children, including identity formation, loss, and attachment difficulties⁴. The experience of being separated from biological parents, first families, cultures of origin, and potentially moving through multiple caregivers in foster or institutional care can have a lasting impact on the child's development⁵. These early disruptions are increasingly understood as profound childhood trauma that can manifest as grief, a sense of isolation, or feelings of abandonment; even when adoptees are placed in nurturing homes⁶. Studies have also suggested that adoption trauma is associated with the disproportionate rates of mental health challenges, attachment and relationship issues, and challenges with addictive behaviors adoptees are known to experience^{7,8,9}.

For transracial and/or transnational adoptees, these challenges are exacerbated by the loss of connections to racial and cultural identities, and common experiences with racism (both subtle and explicit) which can contribute to a sense of feeling unwelcome or unsafe in an adoptive community or family. These challenges highlight that adoption is a complex and formative experience with significant developmental implications that require ongoing attention and support.

Many adoptive parents struggle to accept the idea of adoption trauma due to several deeply rooted beliefs and societal influences. The dominant narrative around adoption in the U.S. broadly speaking, and within Judaism specifically, has for generations mostly characterized adoption as a righteous, or benevolent act of charity. This idea that adoption is a 'good deed' or 'mitzvah' that benefits everyone often leads adoptive parents to believe that providing a stable, loving home is sufficient to erase the child's pre-adoptive experiences¹⁰. This belief not only can minimize the complex emotions that arise from the trauma of a child being separated from their first families, but it also makes many adoptees feel that they are expected to be grateful for an experience that at its foundation is a profound and life-altering loss of family. Some parents may feel defensive or inadequate when confronted with the concept of adoption trauma, as it challenges their perception of themselves as unconditionally healing figures¹¹. The stigma surrounding mental health also complicates the issue, leading adoptive parents to avoid addressing their children's trauma out of fear that it reflects poorly on their parenting¹².

If [society] was just able to [understand] adoption is rooted in grief, trauma, and loss, I think that would just be transformative...It might be hard for a transracial adoptee to want to learn Hebrew, or have a bar mitzvah. It might be really disorienting when there's been so much loss around their own culture, their own language. Why now am I expected to learn somebody else's culture? Somebody else's language?

- Luisa, 35, indigenous, Latina, transracial adoptee and Jewish

This reluctance to acknowledge adoption trauma significantly hinders adoptive parents' ability to support the long-term well-being of their children. When adoptive parents deny or dismiss the trauma their children have experienced, they may miss crucial opportunities to provide trauma-informed care or seek therapeutic or community-based interventions that could benefit their children's emotional and psychological health¹³. This lack of recognition can also damage the parent-child relationship, as children may feel misunderstood or invalidated, exacerbating attachment issues and creating behavioral challenges¹⁴. Acknowledging and addressing adoption trauma is vital for adoptive families to build stronger, more empathetic bonds and for children to develop healthy identities and emotional regulation skills¹⁵. Without this recognition, adoptive parents may inadvertently contribute to their child's ongoing emotional struggles rather than alleviating them.



Barriers to Adoptee Belonging



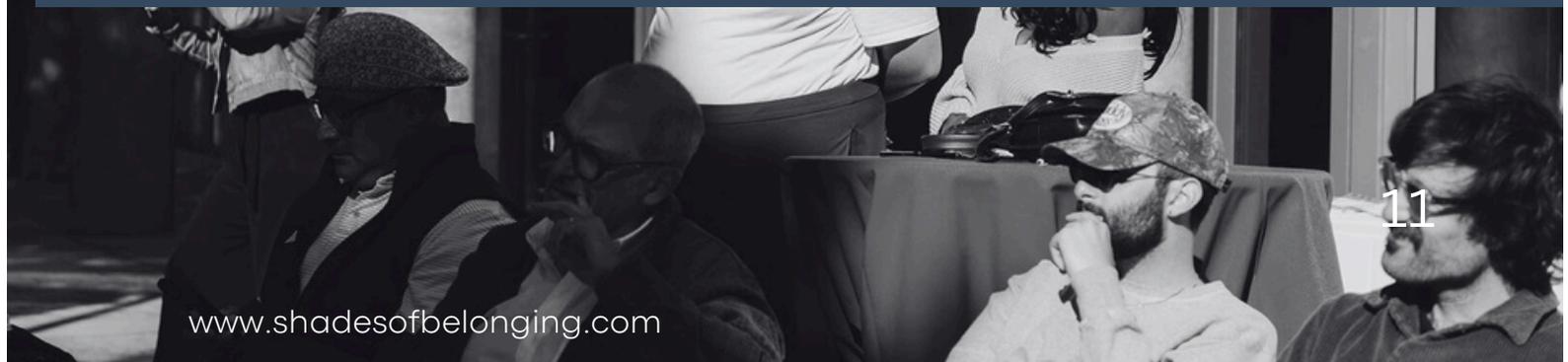
The American Jewish population is predominantly composed of people of Ashkenazi descent, who trace their roots to Central and Eastern Europe. Because this Ashkenazi majority is often perceived or identify as white, especially in the U.S. context, American Jewish communal spaces (synagogues, schools, community organizations) are commonly understood as white-dominant spaces¹⁶. However, approximately 12-15% of American Jews identify as nonwhite, or Jews of Color, and this number is growing due to conversion, adoption, and intermarriage¹⁷. Recent research reveals that among this growing minority of JOCs, as much as 80% have experienced racial discrimination within American Jewish communities, and often face significant race-related barriers to developing a strong Jewish identity¹. While such experiences are certainly significant challenges for all JOCs, literature on transracial adoption provides some insight into why these barriers may be uniquely difficult to overcome for Jewish adoptees of color.

For people of color in the U.S., racial/ethnic identity development is supported through a process of racial/ethnic socialization, wherein parents teach children about their race, ethnicity and culture; a process which can help children develop a strong sense of self, and prepare them to cope with racial discrimination and marginalization¹⁸. However, white parents with transracially adopted children lack shared racial/ethnic identity and cultural history, and have limited experience navigating racial discrimination. This dynamic contributes to the “transracial adoption paradox” of being raised in a white-dominant environment while still being treated as a person of color, which makes socialization and identity development particularly hard for transracial adoptees because they must learn to cope with mismatches between themselves, their parent’s identity and their predominant cultural community¹⁴.



“ [My mom] just couldn’t. She didn’t have the language, knowledge, capacity to help me navigate racial identity. And so trying to do that as an adult has been messy...I’m still at 45 trying to figure out who I am.

- Ana, 45, biracial, Latina, transracial adoptee and Jewish



There is some evidence that religious identity/affiliation can serve as a protective factor for transracial adoptee identity development and sense of belonging. For example, some adoptees find religious communities provide opportunities to develop a strong aspect of their emerging identity that they can share with their adoptive parents. Or familiarity with religious traditions or practices developed as a child can ease an adoptee's entrance and acceptance into a new community as an adult¹⁹. However, such positive experiences with religious identity often depend on transracial adoptees feeling welcome, or a sense of belonging within their religious community to feel comfortable enough to continually engage in these spaces. Unfortunately, it appears Jewish communal spaces commonly struggle to affirm transracial adoptees/adoptive families in ways that foster a strong sense of belonging.



Research on the experiences of white Jewish adoptive parents has found that adoptees of color frequently have the authenticity of their Jewishness questioned by others; an experience that is particularly harmful when an adoptees' Jewish identity is questioned by their own Jewish community. Also, some adoptive families feel pressure from family members or Jewish communal leaders to discourage an adoptees' connection to their birth heritage, and instead only prioritize or support Jewish identity development³.





These are particularly problematic challenges for adoptees, as affirming their identities is crucial for adoptee psychological well-being, and having opportunities to connect to their cultures of origin is known to support the development of a healthy self-concept^{20,21}. These findings suggest that if Jewish families and communities are to provide healthy and affirming spaces for adoptees, there is a great need to not only better understand the experiences of adoptees of color raised in white Jewish communities, but to also take action to improve the way Jewish communities examine and address issues of race and racism.



Sample & Demographic Details

↙ The Shades of Belonging Study was created to better understand the intersections of race, adoption and Judaism by inviting Jewish adoptees of color to participate in a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews.

All participants in this study were:

- Non-white or mixed-race adoptees.
- Raised in predominantly Jewish households in North America.
- Raised with at least one white adoptive parent.

114

Adoptees completed the quantitative survey

87

Adoptees requested an in-depth interview

30

Interviews were completed for qualitative analysis



One hundred ten participants in this study were raised in the U.S., while four were raised in Canada. The two largest racial groups represented in this study were Latino/Hispanic (57%), and Asian (40%) adoptees, with substantial minorities of Black/African American (19%) and American Indian/Alaskan Native (19%) *. The sample was predominantly women (75%), with substantial minorities of men (18%) and nonbinary people (15%). The predominant ages of participants were 30-45 (44%) and 18-29 (36%), which indicates that most participants were adopted from the late 1970s through the early 2000s. A great majority of study participants were adopted before they were one year old (78%), and were adopted outside of the U.S (69%). The two largest Jewish denominations represented in this study were adoptees from Reform (53%) and Conservative (20%) families.

*These percentages on racial identity equal more than 100% because participants were able to select more than one race/ethnicity that they identify with.



Key Study Findings

Only 25% of JOC adoptees in this study feel a sense of belonging in Jewish community

Sense of Belonging



The primary finding of this research is that among JOC adoptees in this study, only 25% reported feeling a sense of belonging* in Jewish community. This result is troubling, as it is evidence that a great majority of JOC adoptees struggle to feel heard in, validated by, and/or connected to the religious community they were brought into. Such a stark finding suggests that Jewish communities need to do a lot more to truly provide welcoming and affirming environments for JOC adoptees.

*Sense of Belonging was measured using the [Belonging Barometer](#)

Analysis of survey data identified factors that significantly impact the degree of belonging a JOC adoptee feels in Jewish community. These factors specifically included:

- ↘ **Experiences with discrimination** - Adoptees who experienced less racial discrimination in Jewish spaces had a higher sense of belonging than those who experienced more

- ↘ **Knowing other Jewish adoptees** - Adoptees that knew more Jewish adoptees had a higher sense of belonging than those that didn't

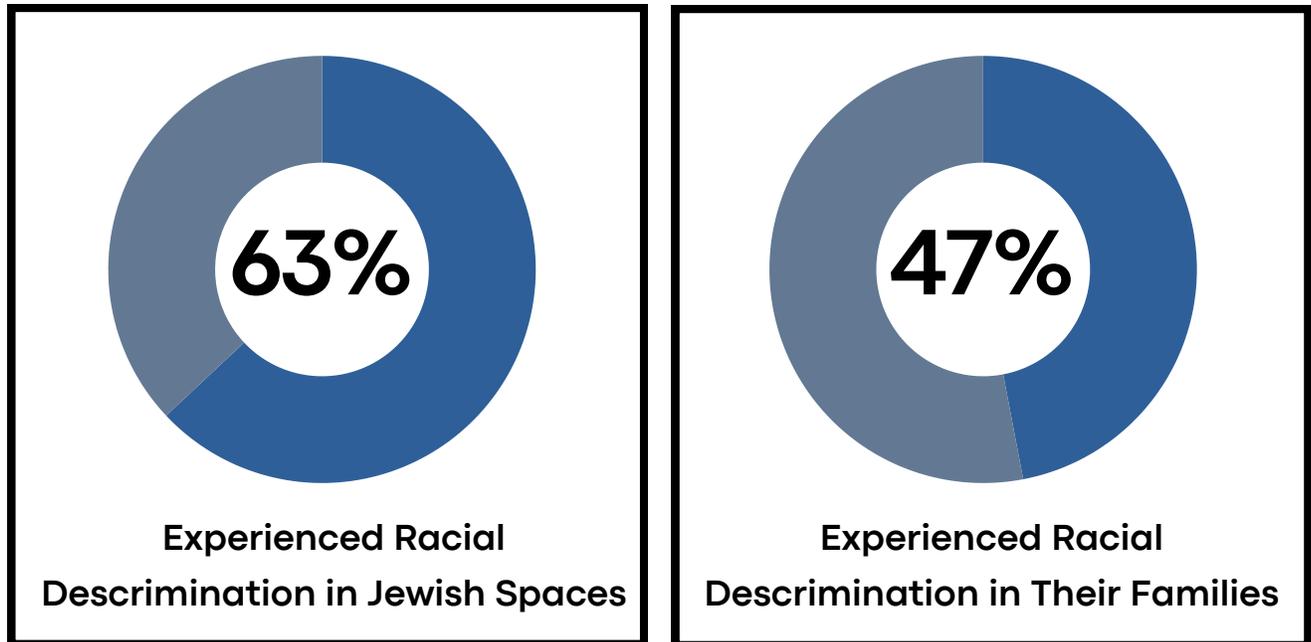
- ↘ **Connections to adoptee race/culture of origin** - Adoptees whose Jewish communities provided more opportunities to connect to their racial identity/culture of origin had a higher sense of belonging than those that did not

- ↘ **Comfort in predominantly white Jewish spaces** - Adoptees with greater comfort in white Jewish spaces had a higher sense of belonging than those with less comfort

- ↘ **Gender** - Adoptees that were nonbinary or women had lower sense of belonging than men

Experiences with Discrimination

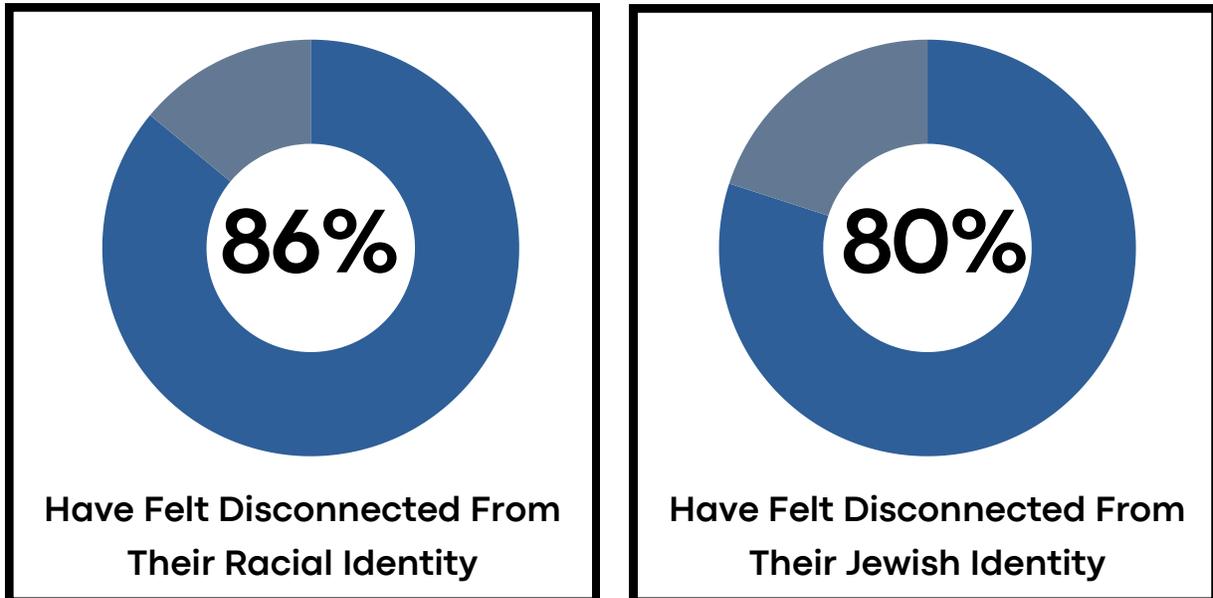
Among adoptees in the study



A majority of JOC adoptees in this study (63%) have experienced racial discrimination in Jewish communal spaces. This degree of discrimination experienced by adoptees is lower than findings in recent related research which found more than 80% of all JOCs have experienced racial discrimination in Jewish spaces¹. However, both studies suggest that, whether adopted or not, experiencing racial discrimination is very common for JOCs in their synagogues, Jewish schools, and community organizations. The current study also found that almost half (47%) of adoptees in this study have experienced racial discrimination within their own adoptive families. Taken together, these findings further demonstrate a great need for Jewish communities and families to examine and address their understanding of race, racism, Jewish identity and how expressions of racial bias in Jewish spaces and families are harming Jewish adoptees of color.

Experiences with Identity & Affirmation

Among adoptees in the study



JOC adoptees in this study reported feeling extremely high levels of disconnection from their own racial and religious identities. These results reflect an issue often identified in explorations of adoption; a phenomenon in which the experience of adoption leaves many adoptees feeling a sense of ‘not being enough’ or not feeling they fully belong in their racial communities, the racial communities of their adoptive parents, or their religious communities. This experience is further reflected in results from this study that found that 64% of JOC adoptees do not feel accepted by white community, and 57% feel their race is a barrier to their engagement with Judaism. Thus, it appears that not only do JOC adoptees feel internally disconnected from their own racial identities, and their adoptive communities/identities; but they also feel externally judged as ‘not being enough,’ or not affirmed enough by others in the dominant community to a degree that seems to limit their connection to Judaism. These findings are congruent with earlier explorations of adoption and Judaism, which suggest adoptees of color commonly have their Jewishness questioned by others and/or do not feel wholly welcome in Jewish spaces³.

Social Connections & Perceptions of Jewish Community

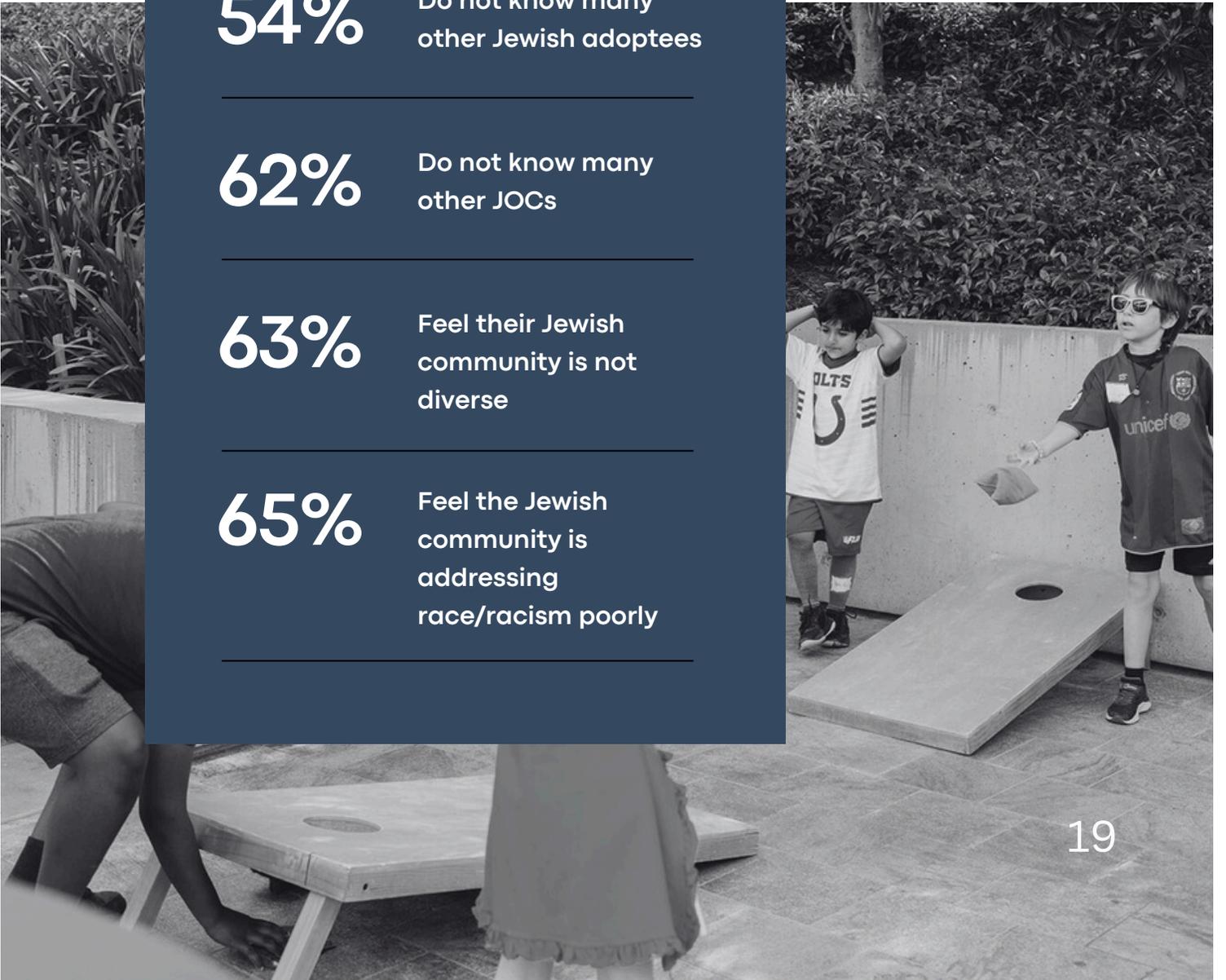
Among JOC adoptees in this study:

54% Do not know many other Jewish adoptees

62% Do not know many other JOCs

63% Feel their Jewish community is not diverse

65% Feel the Jewish community is addressing race/racism poorly





This study found that a majority of JOC adoptees do not know many other Jewish adoptees (54%), or many other non-adopted JOCs (62%). This finding provides a possible explanation for the degree of isolation felt by many Jewish adoptees; a finding that mirrors evidence of prevalent feelings of isolation among the broader transracial adoptee community^{5,9}. Of particular interest, however, is that these missing social connections, and lack of diversity in Jewish community seems to persist, despite growing evidence that the population of American JOCs is growing rapidly^{2,17}. It is possible this paradox exists because JOCs are not as formerly engaged in traditional Jewish communal spaces as their white counterparts¹. If this is the case, it suggests that Jewish settings such as synagogues, schools and community organizations need to take action to improve the way they welcome and attract JOCs to engage in these environments. However, data from this study also demonstrates that many JOC adoptees feel the Jewish community, broadly speaking, is addressing issues of race/racism poorly (65%); which may explain why the growing JOC community is less likely to engage in Judaism through these traditional avenues.

Emergent Qualitative Themes

Primary Themes from Interviews with JOC Adoptees

1 Adoption as struggle/trauma

2 Prevalence of experiences with discrimination

3 Sense of isolation

4 Pursuit of belonging

5 Transformative affirmation

6 Hope and perseverance





Analysis of the qualitative data gathered from 30 interviews conducted as part of this study highlight six themes of struggle and resilience among Jewish adoptees of color. In many ways, these themes provide supplemental evidence to support findings from the quantitative portion of this study. Through in-depth conversations, many adoptees shared stories of the struggle they experience grappling with their identities, often feeling caught between racial and cultural worlds. These narratives often expressed an understanding of adoption as a childhood trauma with profound and ongoing impacts on an adoptees' life. Many adoptees also noted varying degrees of racial discrimination throughout their lives, in both Jewish settings and broader society, which was often directly connected to feelings of not fitting in in their adoptive families, adoptive communities, or their communities of origin. Relatedly, adoptees commonly reflected a sentiment of social isolation, or 'feeling like the only one' for much of their lives, which was often associated with expressions of self-doubt or loneliness. This isolation appears exacerbated by many adoptees feeling that they could not discuss the hard parts about adoption with their adoptive families, for fear that they would be misunderstood or rejected.

Despite these hurdles, the experiences of JOC adoptees are also characterized by remarkable resilience. For example, many adoptees spoke about actively seeking community connections, or pursuing belonging; often despite set-backs, discrimination, or discomfort they experience. It also is evident that many adoptees see themselves as resilient in a way that is grounded in a sense of perseverance and hopefulness for the future. The perseverance was often expressed as an adoptees' motivation derived from a sense of accomplishment for having come a long way despite challenges they have faced. And the hopefulness appears grounded in an ambition to continue to face and overcome life's challenges in a way that focuses on their own healing, and improving social relationships and connection. For some adoptees, these strengths were greatly facilitated by having supportive or inclusive communities and/or families. In these cases, adoptees often spoke about the transformative power of having people or communities who affirmed their complex emotions and identity explorations.



Jewish Adoptees were asked, “Given what you know now about being adopted and Jewish identity, what would you say if you could go back in time to talk to your younger self?”

“ —
There is always gonna be this feeling of being an outsider. No matter what. And there will be community as well...This discomfort is something you will live with your whole life, but it doesn't have to be devastating. It can also be just a piece of the story. It's gonna be okay. You are going to figure it out. Slowly.

— Leslie, 25, Latina, indigenous, transracially adopted and Jewish —”

“ —
Don't worry. You're not alone. There are so many of you out there. And you're gonna meet so many amazing people. And its gonna be okay. You are not going to be alone.

— Quin, 38, Black, nonbinary, transracially adopted and Jewish —”

“ —
I would say, keep the hope, you know? I was not a super confident person. As I got older I've just gotten better at owning who I am. I would tell myself it's okay. If you're frustrated...those skills...they're gonna come with time. Just hang in there.

— Ana, 32, Asian, transracially adopted and Jewish —”

“ —
I would want to tell me, stop trying to fight all the things that come up for you, and just lean into what feels right authentically. You can create a world where all parts of you are allowed to exist. All parts of you have permission to exist. All of you is deserving.

— Lauren, 37, Latina, Transracially adopted and Jewish. —”

Concluding Thoughts

The Shades of Belonging study provides the largest to-date exploration of the intersections of race, religion and adoption among Jewish adoptees of color raised by white parents. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis this research provides valuable insights into the struggles and triumphs of a significant, yet understudied, sub-group of Jews of Color. Findings from this study reveal not only the unique nature of the JOC adoptee experience, but also potential ways to take action to improve the capacity of Jewish communities to support the complex needs of Jewish adoptees.

As this research demonstrates, a great majority of JOC adoptees do not feel a sense of belonging in Jewish communities. For adoptees in this study, this sentiment was associated with experiences in their Jewish communities related to racial discrimination, social isolation, discomfort within predominantly white spaces, and a sense of disconnection from their racial or cultural identities. The in-depth interviews conducted as part of this study complement these findings, by facilitating greater depth of understanding around challenges commonly experienced by JOC adoptees. And while trends in these data reveal adoptees often see adoption as a childhood trauma which contributes to life-long struggles with discrimination, identity development, and community belonging, many doggedly search for affirming communities and relationships with unrelenting hope and perseverance. And for those that find such affirmation in family, personal or community relationships, a transformative opportunity for healing and belonging can arise.

Therefore, if Jewish communities and families are to support JOC adoptees, it is of the utmost importance that they actively work to affirm adoptees' complex experiences and identities. This will require Jewish communities to wrestle with their preconceived notions of adoption, and critically examine the dominant narrative that suggests adoption is simply a benevolent 'mitzvah.' To truly provide an adoptee with affirmation requires a willingness to listen to and accept all their emotions and experiences; even when they reveal disconcerting truths about the hurts often associated with adoption, and the struggles of identity and belonging commonly faced by JOC adoptees. It is when adoptees feel safe enough to express the depth of their experiences in a fully authentic manner, and are seen, heard, and valued, that they can develop a true sense of belonging.

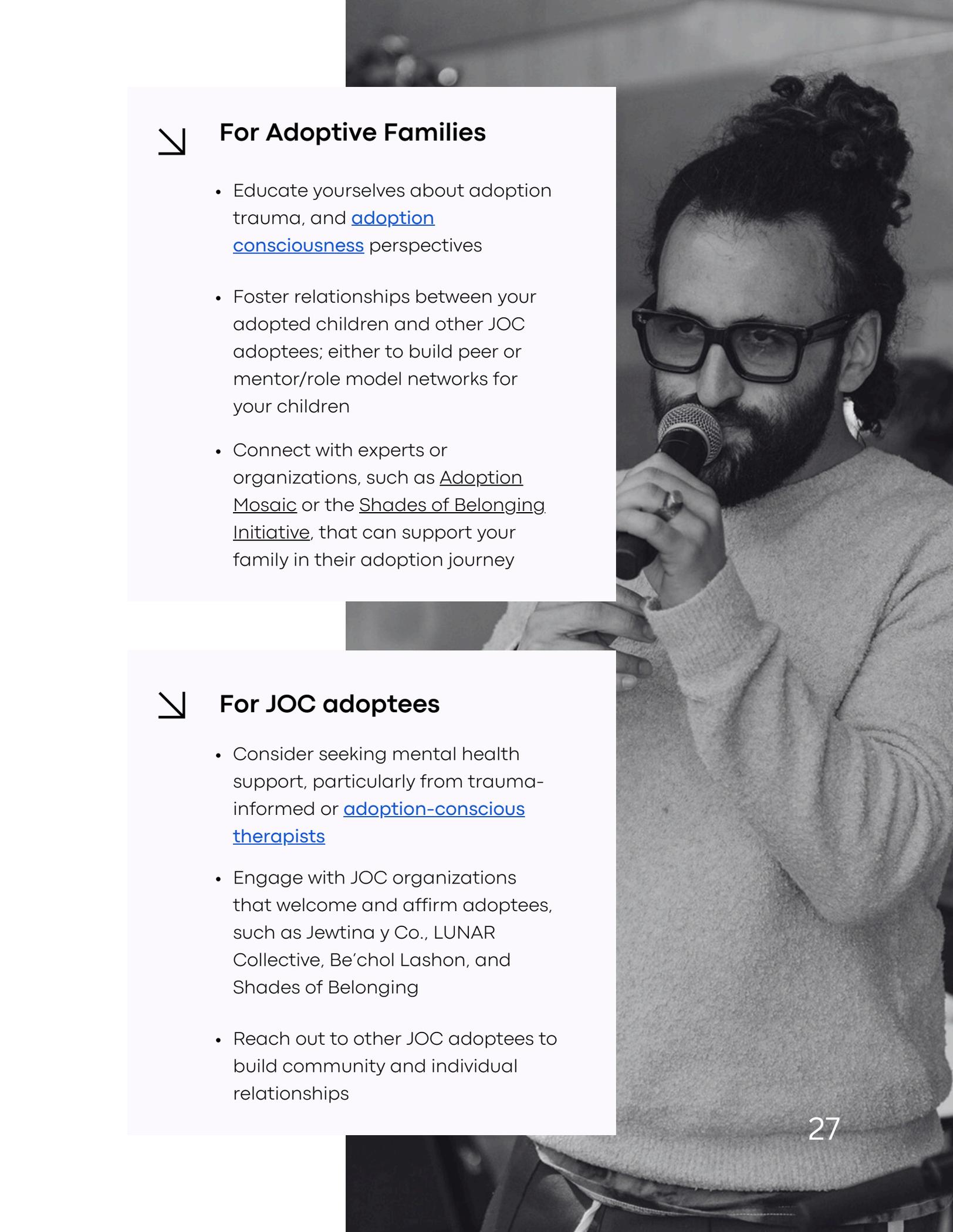
There are many ways Jewish families and communities can take courageous action to work towards fostering greater JOC adoptee affirmation. To aid in this pursuit, we conclude with recommendations for Jewish communal organizations, families, and adoptees that are grounded in the findings of this research. By prioritizing such actions consistently and continuously, Jewish communities can demonstrate not only a commitment to caring for adoptees brought into Judaism, but more broadly, a respect for the diverse narratives and experiences of the growing multi-racial, multi-cultural Jewish population. In so doing, Judaism can continue to move forward in a way that lays the groundwork for more equitable and inclusive Jewish environments, while also strengthening Jewish collective resilience and unity. By aligning with these efforts, Jewish communities can demonstrate an increasing commitment to equity and justice, ensuring that all members feel valued and respected, and contributing to a more inclusive and vibrant Jewish future.

Recommendations for Action:

↘ For Jewish Communal Organizations:

- Actively examine the intersections of racial equity and Judaism, with particular attention to reducing racial discrimination in Jewish spaces
- Seek opportunities to celebrate and explore multicultural, multiethnic Jewish identities and experiences within your community; particularly for adopted youth
- Build partnerships with JOC individuals, groups and organizations such as, [Jewtina.y Co.](#), [Be'chol Lashon](#), [LUNAR Collective](#), the [Jews of Color Initiative](#)





↘ For Adoptive Families

- Educate yourselves about adoption trauma, and [adoption consciousness](#) perspectives
- Foster relationships between your adopted children and other JOC adoptees; either to build peer or mentor/role model networks for your children
- Connect with experts or organizations, such as [Adoption Mosaic](#) or the [Shades of Belonging Initiative](#), that can support your family in their adoption journey

↘ For JOC adoptees

- Consider seeking mental health support, particularly from trauma-informed or [adoption-conscious therapists](#)
- Engage with JOC organizations that welcome and affirm adoptees, such as Jewtina y Co., LUNAR Collective, Be'chol Lashon, and Shades of Belonging
- Reach out to other JOC adoptees to build community and individual relationships



“To the JOC Adoptees out there - know you are not alone. Know there are people out here looking for you. Your community is out here waiting, and we need you; we need each other. Please reach out, so that we can work together to build places where we can feel all parts of who we are are fully seen and affirmed”

- Dr. David McCarty-Caplan,
Researcher behind the Shades
of Belonging Study

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